

International Journal of Role-Playing

The aim of The International Journal of Role-Playing is to act as a hybrid knowledge network, and bring together the varied interests in role-playing and the associated knowledge networks, e.g. academic research, the games and creative industries, the arts and the strong role-playing communities.

Editorial Special issue: Role-Playing in Games

This special issue contains five articles chosen from amongst those presented at the Role-Playing in Games seminar at the University of Tampere, Finland, April 10-11, 2012. Several others from that seminar will be appearing in future issues of this journal.

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Editorial

Special issue: Role-Playing in Games

Welcome to issue four of the International Journal of Role-Playing.

This special issue contains five articles chosen from amongst those presented at the Role-Playing in Games seminar at the University of Tampere, Finland, April 10-11, 2012. Several others from that seminar will be appearing in future issues of this journal. In a way, this is a homecoming for IJRP - the journal was first established as a result of another seminar in the same series, in 2006. Over the years, the style of such events has remained the same: each of the seminars has been free of charge, and about providing expert feedback to works in progress, rather than something where participants would bring ready papers for the purpose of publication. Nevertheless, the events have produced high quality research articles as well, by either helping the authors refine their work for eventual peer reviews - papers from earlier seminars have appeared, for example, in the journals *Fibreculture*, *Game Studies* and *European Journal of Cultural Studies* - or with cherry-picked special issues. Many good examples are included the *Research Methods in Gaming* issue of *Simulation & Gaming* (Mäyrä et al., eds., 2012).

These five contributions represent various facets of role-playing that takes place in games, ranging from game fiction to educational uses. Most of them focus especially on live-action role-playing, yet they all also contribute to our understanding of tabletop and digital role-playing. I believe this reflects the fact that a very high number of scholars in the study of role-playing are arising from the ranks of live-action role-players, many of whom also engage in other forms of game-based role-playing, and are thus particularly familiar with

what research is being done on various platforms in the field.

All of the articles in this issue received their first rounds of critique and feedback during the seminar itself, after which seven of the seminar papers were chosen for further development. The selected, revised works then went through standard double-blind peer review, in accordance with this journal's specifications. In the end, these five were selected for publication. Due to the multi-stage production of this issue, it has its own editorial board, who did the initial paper selection, and review board, consisting of those reviewers who wanted their names publicized. We are very thankful to both, for their very valuable time in making this special issue as great a contribution to role-playing studies as possible.

In *Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities*, Sarah Lynne Bowman takes a qualitative, ethnographic approach to describe interpersonal tensions in communities of live-action and tabletop role-playing, identifying several factors that contribute to it during, and in connection, with gameplay.

Angelina Ilieva, with *Cultural Languages of Role-Playing*, shows how the fictions of role-play are not just reflections of mundane life and fantasy, they are actually created through the use of shared cultural knowledge that plays on known stereotypes and archetypes, borrowed from myth and folklore.

In *A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framings and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-playing Games*, David Jara analyzes the paratexts of tabletop role-

playing manuals, pointing out the complexity of emergent game discourse and narratives.

With Edu-Larp as Revision of Subject-Matter Knowledge, Michał Mochocki argues for the lightening of educational goals for edu-larp, in order to increase both actual learning and teacher willingness to accept larp as a potential tool.

Jaakko Stenros examines the role and functions of non-player characters and ractors in *Between Game Facilitation and Performance: Interactive Actors and Non-Player Characters in Larps*, finding that they can be divided by function into distinct categories that tie into the use of game master power during play.

These five represent just a small selection of what was presented at the seminar. May they serve as an inkling on a phenomenon currently taking place in the field of role-playing studies: innovative looks at existing phenomena that have been observed in play for a long time, but not really analyzed in-depth until now. They build on the tradition of existing research, instead of trying to reinvent the wheel, yet definitely provide new, innovative angles to that tradition.

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Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study

Popular abstract - Much of the current research in the field of role-playing studies focuses upon the positive impact that games can have on the lives of participants. Analysis of the more negative social interactions within role-playing communities becomes necessary in order to establish a more complete picture of the psychosocial effects of these games. This research describes potential problems within role-playing communities in order to aid groups experiencing cohesion difficulties.

This thematic, qualitative ethnography describes the types of social conflict occurring within role-playing groups and examines possible sources for their exacerbation. The study includes several types of role-playing from a phenomenological perspective, including tabletop, larp, and virtual gaming. Semi-structured interviews were collected from a selective sample of 30 international participants gathered from vastly different play cultures. While the types of games and methods of play contributed to conflict in some instances, striking similarities between the experiences of players across modes, cultures, and genres were observed.

Emergent themes for sources of conflict included general problems inherent to group behavior, such as schisms, Internet communication, and intimate relationships. Other sources of conflict unique to the role-playing experience included creative agenda differences, the game master/player power differential, and the phenomenon of bleed, both in- and out-of-game. Potentially conflict-inducing play styles included long-term immersion into character, campaign-style, and competitive play.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, academic work on role-playing games has increased steadily. Much of the current research in the field focuses upon the positive impact that games can have on the lives of players, including community building, skill training, identity exploration, and increased empathy (Bowman, 2010; Müller, 2011; Meriläinen, 2012). This emphasis on the benefits of role-playing games has arisen, in part, as a response to decades of societal backlash since *Dungeons & Dragons*, working to debunk popular myths decrying the “evils” of the practice (Müller, 2011; Stark, 2012).

While the rise of scholarly work attempting to rehabilitate the image of role-playing in the eyes of the public is needed, analysis of the more negative social interactions within role-playing communities becomes necessary in order to establish a more complete picture of the psychosocial effects of these games. Ultimately, researchers must undertake any endeavor to analyze these problems with care not to generalize or overstate certain issues, as conflict arises within most groups given

enough time and complexity regardless of the context. Furthermore, strife within role-playing communities does not necessarily negate the positive qualities of game experiences.

This thematic, qualitative ethnography analyzes the types of social conflict occurring within role-playing communities and describes possible sources for their exacerbation. Emergent themes for these sources of conflict included general problems inherent to group behavior, such as schisms, Internet communication, and intimate relationships. Other sources of conflict emerged as specific and unique to the role-playing experience, including creative agenda differences, the game master/player power differential, and the phenomenon of *bleed*, both in- and out-of-game. In this study, bleed refers to the phenomenon of the thoughts, feelings, physical state, and relationship dynamics of the player affecting the character and visa versa (Jeepen, n.d.; Montola, 2010; Bowman, 2013). Potentially conflict-inducing play styles included long-term immersion into character, campaign-style, and competitive play. The paper

concludes with preliminary solutions for solving conflicts in role-playing communities.

Many players emphasize the intense emotional experiences gained within role-playing games as the most valuable component (Montola and Holopainen, 2012). Literary critics stress the importance of conflict as an inherent impetus to the progression of story and character evolution. This study seeks to untangle emotionally intense moments in games that players process later as positive from experiences that cause rifts in role-playing communities and lasting psychological distress.

Sources of conflict within role-playing communities have yet to receive comprehensive, scholarly attention. However, popular sources such as forums, blogs, and published articles address specific causes of conflict, often with the intention

Role-players have openly discussed issues arising from differing creative agendas amongst players for over fifteen years

of providing advice to role-players experiencing these problems. In an opinion piece entitled “The Non-United Larp States of America,” Aaron Vanek charts a trend in American larp communities toward splintering and fracturing (Vanek, 2011). Role-players have openly discussed issues arising from differing creative agendas amongst players for over fifteen years, resulting in various theories of player motivation (Kim, 1998; Pohjola, 1999; Edwards, 2001; Kim, 2003; Bøckman, 2003; Harviainen, 2003; McDiarmid, 2011; Bienia, 2012; Kim 2012).

Other recent discussions in the Nordic larp community focus upon psychological safety and bleed effects after intense role-play sessions (Bidslet and Schultz, 2011; Koljonen, Munthe-Kaas, Pedersen, and Stenros, 2012; Pedersen, 2012; Koljonen, 2013). With regard to personal relationships, Gordon Olmstead-Dean has described both the benefits and difficulties associated with intimacy in larp settings (2007). Additional articles advise role-players on how to interact maturely in-game with players they

dislike, an example of coping with “bleed-in” related conflicts (Kiernan, 2013).

Similar resources exist from other subcultures, such as “geek” and pagan groups, offering folk wisdom for dealing with common social conflicts such as ostracism and “trolling” (Suileabhain-Wilson, 2003; Eran, 2005). “Trolling” has become a common term in Internet vernacular and other subcultures as well; the popular warning “don’t feed the trolls” refers to indulging the behavior of individuals who wish to cause strife for others within a community (Urban Dictionary, n.d.; Wikipedia, n.d.; Eran, 2005).

Alternately, academic researchers have studied social conflict in more general group populations. Social identity theory explains how members of communities divide into “in-group” versus “out-group” categories based on status (Ahmed, 2007). Johnson & Johnson’s *Joining Together* covers various aspects of group dynamics, including teamwork, conflicts of interest, and controversy (1994). Organizational psychologists describe problems in group development, such as the “Storming” stage, where members challenge the norms and leadership of the team (Tuckman, 1965; Wheelan, 1994). Organizational development also emphasizes how to best manage groups through effective leadership (Balzac, 2011). In addition, researchers have emphasized strategies for negotiation and third-party intervention as key to resolving social conflicts (Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin, 1992).

This project aims to bridge the gap in the literature between folk wisdom regarding conflicts in role-playing communities and more general theories of conflict resolution in sociology and organizational psychology. The study gathers data from 30 participants in America and abroad, identifying possible problems within role-playing communities in various contexts. The initial questionnaire included general queries on conflict in role-playing groups, requesting examples of splintering, bleed-related effects, conflict-inducing games, and resolution strategies (See Appendix A). The interest in schisms within groups arose from personal experience and Vanek’s assertions regarding their ubiquity (2011). The focus on bleed and resolution strategies was inspired by the current discourse in the Nordic larp and indie communities on psychological safety (Bidslet and

Schultz, 2011). However, the majority of the secondary literature for this study was consulted after data analysis in order to preserve the inductive approach, as described in the Method section.

In an attempt to remain inclusive, this ethnography examines many types of role-playing from a phenomenological perspective, including tabletop, larp, and virtual gaming. Participants were gathered from vastly different play cultures, including online play, boffer games, theater style larp, tabletop, freeform/jeepform, and Nordic larp. While the types of games and methods of play contributed to conflict in some instances, striking similarities between the experiences of players across modes, cultures, and genres emerged. As Bjarke Pedersen asserts, though theorists often consider larp a more immersive form than others, highly intense experiences can result from tabletop and virtual games as well (Pedersen, 2012). Therefore, this report will highlight general themes over multiple formats of play, with plans to expand the data in later work with specific details, contextual information, and examples.

This research aims to describe potential problems within role-playing communities in order to aid groups experiencing cohesion difficulties. As the ethnographic method requires small samples, this data should be regarded as a descriptive inventory of possible sources of conflict as reported by these respondents, not a large scale explanatory model for conflict in all role-playing communities. The survey questions were kept intentionally vague in order to elicit a wide range of spontaneous responses and cover many possibilities (See Appendix A). Therefore, the majority of the subthemes emerged independently from the survey questions and not all participants mentioned certain issues or broader categories. Numerical accounts should be viewed as points of potential interest, not as predictive of the rates of incidence within large-scale social dynamics, as further explained in the Method section. Ultimately, this work serves both an exploratory and pragmatic function.

2. METHOD

This exploratory study offers a thematic analysis of information garnered from 30 ethnographic interviews with international participants from February 2011 to January 2012. 20 participants hail from the United States, while 10 reside in Europe (see Table 1). Interviews were attained in the following ways: soliciting volunteers after a presentation on the topic at the Nordic larp conference Knudepunkt 2011; sending out general calls for interviews on Facebook and message boards such as Larp Academia and International Larp Academia; and approaching friends and acquaintances, several of whom suggested other participants. All interviews and transcripts are kept on the researcher's home computer with password protection; only the researcher has access to this data.

In terms of reflexivity, my personal interest in the topic stems from over nineteen years as a role-player in virtual, tabletop, and larp environments and over fifteen years conducting ethnographic research on the subculture. While my previous work emphasizes its social and psychological benefits (Bowman, 2010), personal experiences witnessing and taking part in intensive conflicts within role-playing communities led me to investigate their causes.

All participants provided written consent to allow the use of their real name in the research with the exception of five, who were assigned an alias. The use of real names allows researchers to distinguish between reports given by "average" players, experienced organizers, game designers, and "experts in the field." Due to the emerging nature of role-playing academia, this study will consider individuals "experts in the field" if they contribute to the body of subcultural knowledge via convention panels, popular writing, or scholarly publication. Along these lines, play accounts and opinion pieces from popular sources such as The Forge forum, the Knutepunkt books, and *Playground Magazine* will also receive brief consideration. Thus, the participant sample is considered selective rather than random (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006), as players with extensive experience and leadership within their communities were deliberately recruited.

My epistemological perspective to this ethnography was phenomenological in nature, as I view my participants as co-creators and experts in accurately reflecting upon their own experiences (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). My approach to the topic was mainly inductive, preferring to garner themes directly from the data without favoring an overarching theoretical framework to limit my perspective (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, initial theoretical conceptions of bleed influenced the questions (Jeepen, n.d.; Waern, 2010; Montola, 2010). Various theories of creative agenda were applied during the outlining process to serve as organizing principles (Kim, 1998; Pohjola, 1999; Edwards, 2001; Kim, 2003; Bøckman, 2003; Harviainen, 2003). More extensive secondary literature in role-playing studies and sociology was consulted after the construction of the analysis in order to illuminate possible explanations for mentioned phenomena.

I purposefully avoided including my personal experiences in the data to avoid the appearance of bias in the analysis. However, to a degree, the interests of the researcher are always present in the types of questions asked and the selection of data considered relevant to report. Complete removal of the researcher from the data is not possible or -- in the case of narrative and interpretive ethnographies -- even desirable (Denzin, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Willis and Trondman, 2000; Van Maanen, 2011). The tension between the presence of the researcher's subjectivity in the interview and analysis process and the more "objective" data offered through participant responses is a conundrum all ethnographers encounter (Heath and Cowley, 2004; Walker and Myrick, 2011).

The style of interviews included email questionnaires (see Appendix A) with semi-structured follow-up questions; semi-structured Skype interviews with audio-only; Skype interviews with video; face-to-face interviews transpiring in the participants' homes; or some mixture of these styles. The compiled data corpus features 275 pages of densely packed, single spaced data. Though full transcription would have been preferable, only partial transcription was possible at the time of data analysis due to time constraints and a lack of funding. Partial transcription has

been noted as acceptable for thematic analysis, as the researcher can identify broad themes without recording all verbal and non-verbal cues (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2011).

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

Participant Name	Gender	Location	Role in Community
Olivier Artaud	M	France	P/E
Steven Balzac	M	Mass., USA	P/G/D/E
William Blackrose	M	Texas, USA	P/G
Adam Blatner	M	Texas, USA	P/D/E
Anne Standiford Brown	F	Texas, USA	P
Steven Carpenter	M	Ariz., USA	P/G/D
Tara Clapper	F	N.J., USA	P/G/E
D. David D'Guerra	M	Texas, USA	P/G/E
Brandi Dunn	F	Calif., USA	P/G
Jan Engman	M	Sweden	P
Flavio Faz	M	Texas, USA	P
Dain Geist	M	Texas, USA	P/G
Kirsten Hageleit	F	Calif., USA	P/G/D/E
Stephanie Howsare	F	Texas, USA	P/G
Carol Irving	F	Texas, USA	P/G
Gina Jenson	F	Sweden	P
Matias Kilpelä	M	Finland	P
Ben Mandall	M	Ariz., USA	P/G/E
Bill Maxwell	M	Calif. USA	P/G/D
Chris McClaren	M	Texas, USA	P/G/D
Karla Nylund	F	Sweden	P
Tore Olbert	M	Sweden	P
Frederik Berg Østergaard	M	Denmark	P/G/D/E
John Parker	M	U. K.	P
Michael Sawyer	M	Texas, USA	P
Elena Simon	F	Geor., USA	P/G
Pietti Toivonen	M	Finland	P
Even Tømte	M	Norway	P
Aaron Vanek	M	Calif., USA	P/G/D/E
Matthew Webb	M	Texas, USA	P/G/D
Total: 30	M = 21 F = 9	USA = 20 Europe = 10	P=30 G=18 D=11 E=10

Key for Role in Community: P = Player, G = Gamemaster/organizer, D = Game designer, E = Expert in the Field

After transcription, an outline was constructed containing the major themes emerging from the data. The data was then highlighted in Microsoft Word with color codes for each theme. Large sections of transcription were placed into the new

outline according to theme in order to map consistencies and distinctions within the data. Each account was mined for data extracts with specific subthemes and examples, which were then organized within a third outline structure. This structure provided a “skeleton” for mapping the most relevant aspects of the research.

Numbers of incidence of each subtheme were noted in this third outline with the names and aliases of participants included in shorthand form, e.g. “Conflict creating divisions between players/ drawing of battle lines: 7 (Ta)(Br)(Aa)(Da)(Bi)(St) (Stef).” Some accounts fit into multiple categories, as is common with thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The numerical instances provided are more of a rough estimate of the prevalence of themes than the sort of exact account provided by a method such as content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). They offer a sense of the frequency of reports of similar phenomena in the data with the understanding that frequency does not necessarily indicate greater significance (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2011). Similarly, a concept mentioned by only one participant does not lessen the value or explanatory power of that insight.

Using this skeleton outline, an initial draft of this document was produced. Many ethnographers assert that writing the “narrative” of the data in a streamlined fashion is the most important stage of the ethnographic process, one that relies upon the unique perspective of the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Van Maanen, 2011). In addition, the semi-structured interview depends upon the motivation level of the participant and the interpersonal dynamics between the researcher and subject. Thus, generalizability, reliability, and validity are not appropriate measurements with this method, as other social constraints may yield different results.

A major constraint of thematic analysis is the denseness of the data, themes, and subthemes. Some researchers construct lengthy inventories of the large range of themes noticed in the data, each of which may be important to the whole; others prefer to feature a few key case studies in order to illustrate larger concepts (Baszanger and Dodier, 2004; King 2011). As an exploratory work synthesizing concepts that are new to the academic

study of role-playing, a certain comprehensiveness was necessary in this analysis, so each category does feature lengthy inventories. Important subthemes have been inventoried in Tables for ease of reading according to rate of incidence and alphabetical order. Short descriptions and quotes are interspersed throughout the text to highlight particular points, with more lengthy quotations and thick description reserved for later work (King, 2011).

3. METHOD

3.1 Schisms

Interview questions focused upon experiences of disruption in the cohesion of role-playing communities and their causes. For the purposes of this paper, the term “schism” refers to conflicts leading to a community splintering into subgroups. See Table 2 for several examples of schisms.

7 participants reported factions developing within their role-playing communities that created a division between players in which “battle lines” were drawn in support of specific parties. 6 offered examples of players leaving the group as a result of these schisms and forming new games. Bill Maxwell described players who do not choose a side often acting as “loose connectors” or diplomats between the splintered groups. Michael Sawyer often found himself in this role, stating, “I constantly felt as if I was the one who was having to mend fences, bring people together, and make them have fun and ease their conflict.” This conciliatory behavior serves the function of third party intervention, a common mediation technique (Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin, 1992).

Table 2: Examples of Schisms

Examples of Schisms	Incidence
Games dissolving completely as result of conflict	8
Factions developing within the group, "battle lines" drawn	7
Cliques forming, sometimes chasing off new players	6
"My Larp is Better than Your Larp" syndrome	6
Players leaving group, starting new games in protest	6
Strong, fair, and unbiased leadership as key to resolving conflicts	6
Belief that one's group role-plays better, is superior to others	5
Long term-grudges as sources of repeated strife	5
Strife as natural outgrowth of group dynamics	4
Campaigns constantly seeking new players due to schisms	3
Elitism and "diva" players	3
Forming new communities as a positive result of schisms	3
Schisms affecting finances, lawsuits over intellectual property	3
Student challenging or ousting mentor	3
Years in static group causing annoyance, "inbred" or "incestuous" player pools	3
Layering of roles confusing when participating in multiple activities together	2
Players not choosing a side, serving as diplomats	2

Organizational psychologist and game master Stephen Balzac described the large schism that occurred in the late '80s within the East Cost larp community the Society for Interactive Literature (SIL), which resulted in the formation of the Interactive Literature Foundation (ILF). Balzac suggested that in cases where two organizers lay claim to a gaming group, the players' decision to stay with the original group or join the new faction works to prove the perceived legitimacy of the leaders in question, especially if one group can "win the lawsuit and claim the name." 3 other participants mentioned schisms affecting financial relationships, especially within game companies and for-profit larps when lawsuits over intellectual property arise.

Schisms in gaming groups tend to affect most, if not all, members on some level. D. David D'Guerra lamented unresolved storylines resulting from groups dissolving before the narrative arc could complete. 2 participants stated that campaign-style games must constantly seek new players as the result of gamers leaving over unresolved conflict. New players may enter gaming groups unaware of past game history, problem players, or bad blood, which can blindside them later.

3 participants identified elitism and "diva" players as inherently problematic. 6 mentioned issues arising from cliques of friends operating within the community, including instances of cliques turning against outsiders or chasing off new players. Flavio Faz expressed feelings of exclusion when he began playing *Vampire*, where secrets were kept within the "inner circle" of players. When asked if this secrecy caused problems, he responded, "Oh, all the time. I mean, that's why I stopped playing."

Matthew Webb witnessed larps "poisoned" by interpersonal conflict and "dying a slow, deliberate death" due to bad attitudes on the part of certain players. Some participants insisted that communities must remove "problem players" from the gaming group. One suggested the "mechanisms of proper social ostracism" as a positive solution, working to "drive the problem player out to make him or her correct their behavior." Other participants felt that removing problem players was one of the responsibilities of the game master.

Schisms in gaming groups cause problems when players dissolve friendships or refuse to role-play with one another due to unresolved conflict. 5 participants mentioned long-term grudges as the source of strife. 8 participants reported games completely dissolving as the result of conflict, with stated reasons such as: organizers quitting; excessive in-character and out-of-character squabbling; fear of confrontation with problem players; lack of enthusiasm/interest; and rules disputes.

Several participants emphasized that groups lacking in substantial out-of-character socialization tend to induce feelings of alienation in individual players. D'Guerra suggested that without other shared activities to help diffuse tension, individuals locked in conflict have nothing else to bind them together. When groups lack social activities outside of game, their primary interaction occurs in-character, which can affect their interpretation of the "real life" personality traits and motivations of other players.

What might be dubbed the "My Larp is Better than Your Larp Syndrome" further intensifies divisions.

5 participants witnessed the problematic belief that a player's own group role-plays better than others or that a player's favored game reigns supreme. Elena Simon mentioned an experience at a convention where a panel discussion devolved off-topic as the game masters subtly argued about whose game had a better system.

This elitist mentality extends to in-game dynamics as well when players enact characters and rules in a manner that others find "incorrect." 2 participants speculated that this reaction may result from human nature. Mandall suggested that "anyone becoming very invested in anything -- be it sports, politics, gaming, anything -- often become the least tolerant of minor deviations from what they understand the norm to be." This frustration is further explored in the section on Simulationism below.

Ultimately, 4 participants accepted social strife as a natural outgrowth of group dynamics. Balzac explained that conflicts typically occur during Stage Two, the Storming Phase of Tuckman's Model of Group Development. In the Storming phase, individuals become passionately invested in the group and must learn how to resolve disputes in a productive manner to avoid splintering (Tuckman, 1965; Wheelan, 1994). Balzac emphasized the need for leaders to keep calm, avoid escalation, and avoid perceiving conflict as a personal failing during this stage. Supporting this notion, 6 other participants mentioned strong, fair, and unbiased leadership as key to resolving conflicts and keeping gaming groups intact. In these circumstances, players want the leader to serve as a third party intervener in the conflict, either as mediator or arbitrator (Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin, 1992). Finally, 3 participants mentioned that groups splintering and creating new communities may contribute positively to the subculture by offering a plurality of styles and groups for players to explore.

3.2 Internet communication

Several participants mentioned Internet communication as a source of conflict, both in live action games with an online component and in text-based games on forums or IRC. 2 indicated the relative anonymity of online environments as inherently problematic, echoing critiques in scholarship on the subject (Alonzo and Aiken,

2004). Balzac mentioned the work of Bandura, identifying anonymity as a general license for less accountable behavior. 2 participants believed that impersonal online environments enable gamers to forget the player behind the character; Even Tømte used the psychological term "projection," indicating that players more easily project their own feelings onto other players online, whether interpreting them as enemies or friends.

Easily read another's tone, cannot see facial expressions, may blow situations out of proportion

6 participants claimed that face-to-face communication is more desirable than text. With text-based communication, individuals cannot easily read another's tone, cannot see facial expressions, may blow situations out of proportion, and are more willing to make disrespectful comments. 8 mentioned a greater readiness for aggressive communication, using the following words to describe emotional reactions online: witch hunts, arguments, flaming, bitching, trash-talking, forum stalking, angry, impulsive, and hateful behavior. 2 advised avoiding online discussion until emotions fade.

Alternately, 2 participants believed that online communication fosters resolution, providing opportunities for apologies and clearing up misunderstandings in between game sessions. Participants discussed both private and public resolution strategies in online environments. One participant preferred private, online discussion through email or Instant Messenger (IM) as less prone to create problems within the group dynamic. However, 2 cited incidents of email and IM confrontations as the source of conflict, indicating that disputes can escalate in private communication. D'Guerra advocated the use of group discussion on online forums, which may facilitate better airing out of problems, though he also admitted the possibility of escalation as more people get involved in public debates.

6 participants indicated that online play – including forums, emails, IMs, chat rooms, IRC, and other role-playing environments – encourages

a higher level of immersion and time investment. Stef Howsare, a game master for an active IRC *Vampire* game, explained that the format allows for continual play, stating that some players are immersed in character "most of the day, every day ... we have had players who seem to be on the server 24 hours a day, with just an hour break here or there to sleep or eat." 2 participants insisted that extensive online play becomes exclusionary for players who desire less participation. 6 cited examples of extensive online play causing neglect for out-of-character responsibilities, a concern echoed in popular representations of role-players in *The Guild* and *Second Skin*. Thus, while such representations may seem sensationalistic to many gamers, some of my participants did echo societal concerns regarding excessive online immersion.

In some cases, the online format offers a convenient communication channel between the players and game masters during conflict resolution. Howsare admitted that she often avoids out-of-character discussion with players regarding her game, though she does resolve conflicts in private online rooms with other staff when necessary. Dain Geist and Brandi Dunn praised the Coordinator chain intervention strategy of the Mind's Eye Society (formerly the Camarilla organization), which involves email communication between the Coordinators and players. The Mind's Eye Society also refers players to their online Code of Conduct, which details expected etiquette procedures (Camarilla, n.d.). Both participants emphasized that Coordinators must remain active and available for these strategies to help.

Some participants acknowledged the Internet as an important vehicle for enhancing community rather than disrupting it. 3 praised the Internet for expanding friend groups and creating greater possibilities for international play. Others confided that they experienced greater comfort with online role-playing due to social anxiety. In addition, some participants mentioned players using forums to praise one another's role-playing and costuming. 4 encouraged online discussion during character creation and plot development. 4 described discussions with organizers over email as a positive contribution to the game. Overall, participants expressed ambivalent attitudes

towards Internet communication with regard to its effects on group cohesion.

3.3 Intimate relationships

Several participants mentioned intimate relationships within gaming groups as potentially problematic. While players joining groups hoping to meet a mate and intra-group dating are practices hardly unique to role-playing, these behaviors can negatively impact the game as a whole. Ben Mandall observed various undesirable mating strategies within gaming groups, including the following: actively pursuing players in committed relationships, making unwanted sexual advances, and attempting to see how many players will fight for an individual's favor. 6 participants reported unrequited crushes as a source of discomfort both in-character and out-of-character.

2 observed individuals having multiple sexual partners within the group, with Mandall terming such behavior the "dating go round." Regardless of one's views on sexual morality, such behavior can cause problems for the group as a whole. 6 players described their role-playing group suffering as the result of break-ups, with Simon stating that break-ups cause an "immediate ripple effect within that subgroup at game." Reported issues included incidents of out-of-character break-ups negatively impacting in-character dynamics, players voluntarily leaving or being asked to leave after a painful split, and group schisms resulting from organizers breaking up.

Intimate relationships can affect the game in other potentially problematic ways. 2 participants described in-character dynamics mirroring the emotional state of out-of-character relationships. 2 mentioned players using out-of-character relationships in order to manipulate the organizer for in-game benefits or other displays of favoritism. 6 witnessed jealousy when individuals in an out-of-game relationship developed in-character intimacy with others in the group. 3 reported that continual immersion into in-character intimate relationships can produce bleed-related feelings for the players, with at least one participant witnessing out-of-character break-ups as a result. Howsare shared the experience of a player threatening suicide when an

¹ "Diegetic control" is who has the power or authority to enter things into the diegesis, i.e. "to make things true in the story".

in-character relationship ended due to his attachment to the dynamic between the characters.

To prevent such problems, 3 participants reported players establishing strict rules with their partners prohibiting in-character relationships. Tara Clapper emphatically stated, "I create personal boundaries to avoid [bleed]. For example, my characters DO NOT have intimate relationships in game at larps because I am married." Simon discontinued dating within her gaming group, enforcing this boundary upon herself both in-character and out-of-character. The potential for negative bleed due to intimate role-playing is further discussed in the Bleed section of this paper.

On a positive note, 6 participants reported examples of players meeting through role-playing and marrying later out-of-game. Simon noted the strange experience of watching teenagers join the long-running boffer larp where their parents initially met. Therefore, the potentially negative impacts of intimate relationships in games do not necessarily overshadow the positive interactions.

3.4 Creative agenda differences

Two general concepts in role-playing theory proved useful: play culture and creative agenda. Play culture establishes the expectations of the group in terms of game theme, enactment, level of immersion, boundaries, rules, and appropriate social behavior. Creative agenda refers to the orientation of the player's "stance" relative to the game, divided here into four categories: narrativism, gamism, simulationism, and immersionism (Kim, 1998; Pohjola, 1999; Edwards, 2001; Kim, 2003; Bøckman, 2003; Harviainen, 2003). Each term is briefly defined in the sections below for the purposes of this study.

While the universality of these terms remains controversial, they provide a convenient structure for organization of participant responses. Indeed, some participants used these categories by name when describing their experiences, indicating that they have a passing knowledge of the concepts and find their explanatory power useful. This paper utilizes these terms with the understanding that they do not delimit or encompass all play experiences; debate about the nature and comprehensiveness of these categories remains

beyond the scope of this study. However, 2 participants indicated that a gap in basic vocabulary contributes to confusion and disputes, while one participant noted that establishing a shared vocabulary was an early goal of the Nordic larp scene, a community that appears to function more cohesively than many American larp communities. Therefore, application of some vocabulary, however inadequate, remains useful to both scholarly and subcultural endeavors.

Participant accounts repeatedly noted differences in play culture and creative agenda as key sources of conflict. In important ways, the co-creative, self-generated content of role-playing games makes them unique cultural expressions. Player expectations shape their experiences and demands within these fictional spaces. Several participants stressed the need for game masters and individual players to establish play culture and creative agenda ahead of time. 3 stated that individuals often mistakenly assume that other players think the same way that they do and want the same types of experiences, which can cause problems when attempting to play within the game world. 6 explained that organizers cause problems by failing to detail their creative agenda in advance, though 4 admitted that players often do not wish to openly discuss their own preferences.

Several participants stated that conflict arises when players do not have the same goals or are not getting what they want from the game. 3 stressed that asymmetrical time commitment expectations between players can lead to conflicts. 2 mentioned that disputes arise when players believe that others have broken the implied social contract of the game. 5 insisted that games should attempt to adapt to multiple play styles on an organizational level and 5 criticized players who are unwilling to make such an adjustment. One participant mentioned that some creative agendas may remain entirely incompatible.

3.4.1 Narrativism

Narrativism as a creative agenda emphasizes the unfolding of the story as the most important focus of the game (Kim, 1998; Edwards, 2001; Kim 2003). While many players enjoy a well-expressed narrative, this style can cause conflicts. D'Guerra, a game master, shared frustration when characters "derailed" his well-crafted plot. To avoid this

situation occurring, game masters will often force a plot upon the characters, a process known as *railroading*.

5 participants expressed annoyance at situations when game masters did the following: imposed their narrative on the characters; overly protected the existence of their non-player characters (NPCs); overwhelmed the players with excessive story; or forced the players to “watch NPC theater” when the game master’s characters take center stage or solve problems. 2 shared that these strategies showed a lack of trust for the players. 4 participants expressed a preference for games where creative control of the world and even of the NPCs was shared amongst the group. Vanek expressed frustration with a particular game master’s narrativist style, describing the players as “pawns.” Vanek explained, “It was really like he was trying to direct a movie without a script ... he had the narrative control and he hung onto it tightly, extremely tightly.” Mandall described a “class barrier” inherent within the power dynamics of game masters and players that provides the organizers with an imbalanced portion of the creative input. Conflict between game masters and players is further explored in a later section of this paper.

These individuals may come to view other players according to the parameters of the game world

Some participants described narrativistic strategies on the part of players as well. One participant found it particularly problematic when players force their character’s story onto the game world without the consent of others. Players often enjoy the “spotlight moments” where their character plays a central role in the story. When the story overly focuses on one character, others may feel neglected or ignored.

5 participants described *if-game thinking* taking place long after the fiction of the game has dissipated, such as the player plotting as if the characters and the game diegesis were still in existence. If-game thinking can also result from the gamist or immersionist stance. One participant

stated that hypothetical, if-game thinking and planning for the future are natural human impulses. However, if-game thinking can become detrimental when players have difficulty letting go of character and story motivations. These individuals may come to view other players according to the parameters of the game world, rather than as fellow members of a community engaged in the same creative activity.

3.4.2 Gamism

The gamist stance produced the largest variety of complications for groups as reported in the interview data. Gamism emphasizes rules, achievement, problem solving, and “winning” the scenario when possible (Kim, 1998; Edwards, 2001). Therefore, gamism often promotes an atmosphere of competition within the fiction, which can create off-game disputes. Geist stated that the gamist stance remained acceptable as long as the larger story is considered. However, 4 participants mentioned instances where rules disputes caused rifts in the community, with 2 describing players leaving the game or the breakdown of the entire group as a result.

Several participants explained that gamists become upset when a game master unfairly imposes or reinterprets a rule, as players with this orientation feel that these behaviors break the established social contract. 2 mentioned gamists arguing over badly written rules as problematic group behavior. Participants used several colloquial terms common within role-playing subcultures to describe various disruptive gamist strategies, including the following: loopholing, minmaxing, number crunching, munchkining, metagaming, and rules lawyering. Webb described such terms as pejorative, but expressed that a gamist always expecting to “win” also breaks the social contract. He also expressed annoyance when gamists overuse a rule to solve every in-game problem.

2 participants suggested that gamists need direction within the game to avoid becoming disruptive. 2 felt that excessive, mechanics-based challenges were disruptive to the immersion of the group unless performed in an engaging way. Tore Olbert explained the disconnection between the gamist stance and other modes of role-playing by stating, “I think that people who approach games from a gamist perspective have a harder time

understanding the complexity of role-playing because of it. They think people are ‘missing the point’ of the ‘scenario,’ for example, or ‘wasting time.’”

Alternately, Olbert stated that friendly competition in the game can enhance the experience. 6 participants suggested that individuals should preplan in-character conflicts before the game in order to encourage a spirit of cooperation and inter-immersion. Therefore, participant responses indicate that the gamist stance works best when co-creation and collaboration are emphasized.

3.4.3 Simulationism

For the purposes of this paper, the simulationist stance refers to the goal of maintaining a realistic external setting in terms of description, costuming, story, and character action (Kim, 1998; Edwards, 2001). In this context, realism refers to adherence to the established genre or fictional space and does not necessarily imply social realism.

During the group discussions many seemed to experience their first real, in-depth discussion on what they got out of role-playing games, but the prejudices held against other role-players also came to the fore.

Debates over the perceived superiority of one person’s interpretation of “proper” play sometimes reflect a simulationist agenda; some players feel jarred when others do not perform according to their expectations of realism. 3 shared experiences in *Vampire* games where certain players complained that a particular style of play was “inaccurate” according to their interpretation of the game canon. Participants explained that such players often memorize the game franchise’s canonical works, insisting that their own their interpretation of the content and the rules represents the ultimate truth of the game world. 2 explained that anger arises when individuals not adhering to these interpretations are seen as hampering that player’s style of game and breaking the implied social contract.

Along these lines, 3 participants received criticism from simulationists when their costuming did not conform to that player’s interpretation of the genre or theme. Mandall shared an incident of a player yelling at him for using third-person instead of first-person to describe his character’s actions at a larp, which apparently interfered with that player’s immersion into the fictive reality.

Alternately, Webb explained that simulationists might object to the rules themselves when mechanics “do not pass the veracity test ... what they usually say is, ‘I don’t believe in this rule because it does not duplicate what we’re trying to duplicate.’” According to another participant, simulationists can also cause problems for the game as a whole when they expect a realistic cause-effect relationship to take place that might negatively impact a large group of players. Game masters and players alike must balance the needs of the group with the impulse toward realistic mimesis.

3.4.4 Immersionism

While the definition of immersion remains open to debate (Torner and White, 2012), for the purposes of this study, immersionism describes the player stance of focusing upon thinking and feeling “as the character” in the moment (Pohjola, 1999; Bøckman, 2003). Immersionism can cause problems when character-motivated actions disrupt the group dynamic, another individual’s experience, or a player’s out-of-game sense of acceptable behavior. Since one person cannot ever be sure of another’s state of immersion, when a player defends character actions with the phrase, “it’s what my character would do” or similar justifications, others may suspect an ulterior/ player-driven motive, rightly or wrongly. For example, Mandall mentioned an altercation in which a fellow player refused to accept that Mandall’s personal feelings and reactions were separate from that of his character.

Individuals who prefer higher immersion sometimes become annoyed when character attributes do not differ from those of their player or when a player replicates the same archetype or motivation in every setting. 5 participants indicated that players unwilling to diversify the personality facets of the characters that they choose to play can cause problems in group dynamics.

Immersionist play also connects with “sandbox” style, where players are free to act as their characters with little interference from an overarching plot or game master. D’Guerra, who favors a narrativist stance, expressed initial frustration with sandbox-style games featuring no clear goal, though he later came to appreciate the freedom provided by such a platform. Balzac insisted that some direction must be provided in sandbox-style play in order for player-characters to know how to proceed.

Webb mentioned game designer John Wick’s (2008) view that immersion into character is a selfish style of play if such immersion does not enhance the story or contribute to the enjoyment of others. 5 other participants also emphasized that enhancing the enjoyment of others is a positive quality for players to exhibit. While immersion into character does not necessarily disrupt involvement with the group dynamic, some character types -- such as the “loner” or “curmudgeon” -- do not encourage interaction with others. Overall, participants expressed the notion that each creative agenda should facilitate group play rather than focusing solely on personal enjoyment.

3.5.1 Game master/player conflict

Participants described several examples of conflict between game masters and players. This dialectic is most important in games where the game master/organizer controls the diegesis and/or handles conflict resolution, requiring a “negotiation” between the players and the game master (Fine, 1983). Balzac suggested that conflicts for dominance within the group are natural to human behavior, as individuals seek to test the boundaries of the fictive world and the leader’s limits. Other participants described “alpha” or pack hierarchical behavior with regard to rules disputes and other contested areas within the game, resulting in leaders emerging and dominating play.

2 participants emphasized the role of the game master as the establisher of social boundaries both in- and out-of-game. Many game disputes arise from situations where the players do not feel that the game master has maintained proper boundaries. 6 mentioned game master favoritism as a problem when one player is shown preference over another in-game or out-of-game. Other

inappropriate game master behaviors mentioned included the following: unreasonable expectations, abuse, negligence, lack of availability, inappropriately “messing with” players, dictatorial styles of leadership, heavy-handed rules calls, territorialism, jealousy, and fixing the results of contests.

Alternately, participants offered a large array of conflict-producing player behaviors. 3 criticized player entitlement as a source of conflict. 4 described players complaining about rules to the game master, hoping to wear down the leader’s resolve and gain advantage. As a game master, Howsare specifically avoids talking about the game with her players to forestall their complaining or feeling “pumped for information.”

Some participants mentioned players specifically intending to wreck a plot or game. 2 described incidents of “hijacking” a game, where players intentionally derail the game master’s plot in order to steer events in their preferred direction. Nordic larper Erlend Eidsem Hansen advocates the practice of players “hacking” larps in order to gain greater agency, though he states that “destructive” behavior takes attention away from the game and other players, interfering with others’ ability to have positive experiences (Hansen, 2012).

3 participants described witnessing players arguing with, “flaming,” or otherwise attacking game masters due to unpopular story or rules decisions. Bill Maxwell described an incident where a set of players assumed he had a conspiratorial vendetta against them as the game master based on a negative cause/effect in the game as the result of their characters’ actions. 2 players mentioned the potential for “game master burnout”; in games that require a large amount of energy from game masters, organizers are likely to face exhaustion or feel underappreciated. Ultimately, even in situations where the game master is primarily responsible for adjudicating the boundaries of the game, many participants felt that players should also assume responsibility by exhibiting considerate behavior. 8 participants stressed maturity, cooperation, and respect as desirable player traits.

3.6 Bleed

During enactment, role-players enter a new social frame (Bateson, 2006; Goffman, 1986; 1974; Fine, 1983; MacKay, 2001), inhabiting a character that remains dissociated from their “real life” selves (Gonos, 1975; Bowman, 2010). The character provides an alibi for enacting behaviors inconsistent with the player’s usual identity (Montola and Holopainen, 2012) and offers the perspective of “role-distance” (Gonos, 1975). Despite this distance, out-of-character emotions, thoughts, physical states, and relationships sometimes cross over, a phenomenon known as bleed.

Participants were asked specific questions about bleed with regard to conflicts in their communities. While earlier instances of the term bleed focused mainly on emotional responses (Jeepen, n.d.; Waern, 2010; Montola, 2010), for the purposes of this study, bleed was described as a person’s emotions, relationships, and physical state outside of the game affecting them in the game and visa versa. Because emotions sometimes impact thought processes, the phenomenon of *metagaming*, for example, may sometimes result from emotional responses influencing rational decision making. More recent cognitive scholarship by Lankoski and Järvelä (2012) asserts that character immersion and bleed are natural consequences of how the brain works. Therefore, the emphasis on emotion in previous definitions of bleed may prove inadequate to explain the complexity of bleed experiences.

Participants were asked to identify situations where both bleed-in and bleed-out negatively impacted their lives or their group cohesion. Some participants were familiar with the term bleed, whereas others – particularly in America – expressed surprise that a term existed, corresponding with the aforementioned finding of a gap in basic vocabulary within gaming groups. 6 believed bleed is inevitable when immersing into a character; Olbert added that bleed emotions are central to the human experience, including loss, love, and exclusion. 2 shared that players are often shocked to learn that bleed exists. 2 explained that players are afraid to talk about bleed for fear of judgment, getting shunned by others, or finding out something is “wrong with them.”

4 participants described bleed as valuable in its ability to present players with learning experiences, further suggesting that bleed emotions provide a useful mirror for self-analysis. Tømte, a player in the Nordic larp scene, described purposefully opening up emotionally in order to allow for game-induced bleed.

Kirsten Hageleit stated that ignoring bleed emotions can cause problems in the community and advocates for greater awareness of the phenomenon. She asserts, “I don’t think we can expect human beings to role-play without taking on aspects of the character’s emotional state, or entirely remove our own emotional state out of our portrayal of the character. I don’t think this is a bad thing unless it is ignored.” 4 other participants emphasized that characters are expressions of parts of the player and are inextricably linked with the player on some level; at least 2 shared that characters allow players to express aspects of themselves they never could out-of-character. With this concept in mind, role-players should feel less surprised when their out-of-character feelings and thoughts affect their in-character experience.

However, some individuals feel the need to reinforce their distance from the character with deflection statements such as “it’s just a game.” 3 participants in the study supported this line of thought, emphasizing the importance of laughing and not taking game events too seriously. Alternately, 6 expressed concern for players who use dismissiveness as an excuse not to deal with issues arising within the community as the result of in-character emotional intensity.

Below are some examples of bleed-in and bleed-out provided by participants, expanding upon the following definition by Montola (2010): “Bleed in occurs when ... players’ ordinary lives influence the game, while bleed out occurs when the game influences players despite the protective framing.” Since the definition of the phenomenological experience of bleed is still in flux, data was organized according to the researcher’s judgment and experiences that the participants self-define as “bleed.” These accounts are not intended as absolute examples, but rather suggestions of possibilities open for later debate.

At times, emotional states during role-playing games are difficult to distinctly define. For example, 5 players described either witnessing or experiencing a psychological trigger from past trauma as a result of in-game events, which intensified the player's immediate emotional response to the situation. In some cases, these triggers carried over into post-larp depression. Examples such as these represent a sort of "bleed feedback loop," where emotional circuits become overwhelmed by both in-character and out-of-character information.

3.6.1 Bleed-in

Bleed-in occurs when out-of-game factors affect the player's experience. (See Table 3 for several examples). Hageleit described bleed-in from out-of-character relationships as a near-constant state. 3 participants discussed preferring to interact with people they know out-of-character or getting sought out by "real life" friends in-game, regardless of character motivations. Alternately, 8 shared a tendency to avoid, dislike, not trust, or attack a character in-game due to an out-of-character aversion. In one case, a situation like this almost came to blows; another resulted in actual violence while in-character. In the latter incident, the anger resulted from discovering an in-game secret affair that emotionally impacted both the player and character. The participant shared, "I actually punched [the player] for real, leaving a bruise that lasted for weeks after the game ... it took several months to get rid of the feelings of betrayal and antipathy towards these two persons."

Maxwell once had to adjudicate a situation as game master where a player used downtime actions in their *Vampire* game to enact an unwelcome abuse fantasy on an ex-lover out of revenge; he ejected the offending player from the game, resulting in fifteen years of unresolved anger from other players, including Maxwell's brother. 8 other participants described examples of players taking out frustrations in the game, with 4 suspecting that these actions resulted from feelings of inadequacy with regard to the individual's out-of-character station or life situation.

Table 3: Examples of Bleed-in

Examples of Bleed-in	Incidence
Avoiding, mistrusting, attacking OOC enemies IC	8
Players taking out OOC frustrations IC	8
Pushing OOC desires into the game	6
OOC feelings affecting a character's mood IC	5
Talking out emotions IC when upset over OOC events	5
Intimate dynamics OOC replicating in IC interactions	4
OOC conflicts causing misinterpretation of intent IC	4
Suspicion that IC negative behavior results from feelings of OOC inadequacy	4
"Trolling," targeting IC to produce OOC anger/pain	4
Enjoying the ability to play out OOC fantasies IC	3
Physical discomfort bleeding-in to IC emotions	3
Preferring to interact with OOC friends IC	3
Talking out OOC conflicts while IC to seek resolution	3
Using the game to flirt IC due to an OOC attraction	3
OOC enemies almost or actually hitting each other IC	2
Using the game as escape from OOC anger/depression	2
Feeling rejected OOC due to IC negative reactions to one's character traits	1
OOC conflicts amplifying IC emotions of characters	1
Using intense experiences IC to heal old OOC wounds	1

Key for Bleed-in: IC = in-character, OOC = out-of-character

4 participants described "trolling" behavior, when an individual specifically targets another player ingame in order to produce an emotional reaction. 2 shared stories of "trolls" expressing disappointment when their in-character actions failed to provoke a negative reaction in the player.

Some players felt that bleed experiences offered them the potential for growth or emotional resolution. Previous research supports the notion that role-playing can help improve self-awareness and empathy (Bowman, 2010; Meriläinen, 2012). Overall, the experience of bleed-in was reported as both natural and inevitable by several participants.

3.6.2 Bleed-out

Participants shared many experiences that could be categorized as bleed-out (see Table 4). Intense in-character moments can leave a lasting emotional impact. While players often describe intense emotional moments as the best parts of the game after reflection -- the Golden Moments that keep them role-playing in the hopes of re-experiencing

something similar -- extreme emotional reactions sometimes have negative impacts on the community as a whole.

For example, 3 participants expressed devastation at the loss of an in-game relationship, which resulted in the loss of the associated friendship as well. 4 admitted to experiencing or witnessing post-larp depression. One participant reported a year of depression and grief following the death of his first character. Howsare described four extreme loss responses to character deaths in her IRC *Vampire* game: the loss of her own character resulting in weeks of crying; another player-character repeatedly falling in unrequited love with each of her future characters in order to try to replicate the emotional bond; one suicide threat by a depressed player after his character's death; and another suicide threat due to loss of an in-game relationship.

Table 4: Examples of Bleed-out

Examples of Bleed-out	Incidence
Long-term play creating strong attachment to character	14
Potential for competitive play to cause OOC conflicts	12
Crying IC as powerful, leaving lasting impact OOC	10
Games fostering IC negativity inherently problematic	10
Extreme anger reactions IC: violent threats, actual violence, throwing dice, leaving group permanently	7
Traumatic IC deaths, some leading to months of OOC depression	6
IC conflicts resulting in dissolution of the OOC friendship	5
Over-identification with the character causing conflict	5
Experiencing post-larp depression	4
IC competitive thinking carrying over to OOC attitudes toward other players	4
IC moments experienced as humiliating OOC	4
Any long-term investment in activity can cause conflict	3
OOO devastation over the loss of IC relationship	3
Realistic play, long-term immersion as more intense	3
Anger toward player/GM who killed their character	2
Jealousy over IC events leading to OOC pouting/removing a player from the game	2
OOO death threats in response to IC actions	2
Creating another character to avenge the fallen one	1
Grief over the loss of first character lasting a year	1
High stress situations in games intensify emotions	1
Witnessing player leave the game to cry OOC for hours	1

Key for Bleed-out: IC = in-character, OOC = out-of-character

Participants provided examples of anger bleeding-out as well. Howsare described the fallout when her character staged a coup and became the vampire Prince:

"I – not my character – I actually got death threats as a result of what my character did. I got to the point where I couldn't – I mean, I knew they were not serious. Because, I didn't know where these people were and they didn't know where I was... but when I first got it, I was literally in shock because I had never experienced anything like that in my life. I was just like, 'I can't do this. If this is what it means to be Prince, I can't play anymore.' And even now, just thinking about it upsets me."

Olivier Artaud called campaign play "dangerous," as bleed emotions may negatively impact the community long-term. 14 participants mentioned that long-term play creates a stronger attachment to the character and the desire to protect that character as an entity. As a result of this attachment, competitive, campaign-style play increases the chances of players reacting negatively to threats toward their character's existence or emotions. 12 cited competitive play's potential for provoking out-of-character conflicts.

10 participants mentioned games such as *Vampire: the Masquerade* that foster inter-character negativity as inherently problematic. Participants listed the following features of competitive games as potentially harmful to the group dynamic: cutthroat behavior, backstabbing, secrets, scheming, and the emphasis on in-game social hierarchies.

3 participants noted that any long-term investment in a social group can become conflict-ridden; one emphasized high stress situations as intensifying. However, when layering in-character and out-of-character roles, these conflicts can become more confused and problematic if care is not taken to diffuse them.

3.7 Preliminary solutions

When asked how to cope with negative affect as a result of game-related interactions, the study's participants provided several possible solutions. 11 suggested taking time away from game. 14 advised soliciting help from friends and other players; one suggested asking for support from non-players, while 16 advised requesting support or mediation from the organizers. In cases where another player is at fault, 10 suggested that the organizers remove the offending party from play, either temporarily or permanently.

14 participants advised getting to know players out-of-character in order to promote role distance. Sharing her early experiences in the Camarilla, Dunn explained:

"I had a lot of preconceived notions that people were like their characters. And I think it's easy when that's all you know of them. So, I think it's important to meet people out-of-character, to be nice to people out-of-character, to say, 'if you have any questions, or if you don't understand something, or if you just want to hang out some time or get a cup of coffee...' Make it a human interaction, not a character interaction."

21 encouraged the practice of players in conflict talking out negative emotions out-of-character with one another, either in a formal or informal debriefs. Failure to confront these situations in a reasonable amount of time can result in lingering grudges and hard feelings. 4 suggested hugging, shaking hands, or smiling as ways of indicating friendliness and openness.

14 advised engaging in other non-game related socialization activities to help build community, including workshopping, attending parties, or having dinner as a group after game. 7 suggested resolving unfinished plots in a meaningful way to reduce long-term negative bleed effects. Overall, participants stressed the need for players to consider the group above the desires of the individual, regardless of the style or genre of play.

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or mediation from the organizers. In cases where another player is at fault, 10 suggested that the organizers remove the offending party from play, either temporarily or permanently.

4. DISCUSSION

While role-playing experiences are generally processed as enjoyable by players, some pitfalls do exist when exploring the fantasy worlds of others in a group setting. Some of these problems arise from basic social dynamics, such as the fragmentation of groups, complications arising from intimate relationships, power dynamics between leaders and individuals, etc. Other issues arise from the act of role-playing in a fictional world and enacting a character, such as creative agenda differences, game master/player conflict, and bleed.

Corresponding with Vanek's assertion regarding the commonality of divisions within and between larp groups (2011), most participants in the study had experienced some form of schism within their gaming community, often as the result of the attitudes and behaviors of a relatively small amount of players. Disagreements regarding creative agenda, play culture, and creative control of the game may lead to interruptions in play and disruption of group cohesion. The resulting schisms include factions forming within an existing group, groups splitting into rival communities, or games dissolving altogether. Particularly problematic behaviors include the following: players routinely speaking ill about other players or game masters; excessive arguments over the rules and the game world; competitive behavior bleeding into "real life" interactions; and players "trolling" or targeting one another.

Overall, most participants felt that game masters should serve the function of mediator or adjudicator in these situations in order to solve social problems (Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin, 1992). Sometimes, during mediation, collaboration between all parties remains impossible and the adjudicator must consider alternate solutions, such as the removal of one or more players, for the short- and long-term development of the group (Thomas, 1992). However, ostracism is often frowned upon in role-playing communities as non-inclusive, particularly in American groups; players

will allow problematic behavior to continue in the interests of inclusivity. This tendency corresponds with the first item listed in the popular article “Five Geek Social Fallacies,” which claims that individuals within geek subcultures believe ostracizers to be “evil,” as many self-identified geeks have felt rejected by society at some point in their lives (Suileabhain-Wilson, 2003). While not all role-players self-identify as geeks, many do (Bowman, 2010).

Another common source of conflict reported by participants arises from long-lasting grudges that result from negative experiences with other players in- and out-of-game. This finding corresponds with another assertion in the “Five Geek Social Fallacies,” which states that individuals tend to avoid conflict and “let grudges brew longer than is healthy” (Suileabhain-Wilson, 2003). The majority of the participants emphasized the need for ongoing player communication as necessary to confront and resolve issues. Participants also stressed the need for out-of-game socialization to reinforce the boundary between the game and everyday life, which helps players perceive one another as creative collaborators rather than adversaries.

Several participants mention issues of elitism further intensifying divisions. What might be dubbed the “My Larp is Better than Your Larp Syndrome” is an attitude corresponding with Stages 2 and 3 in indie game designer Mike Young’s Five Stages of Larp Group Development: “Ours is the best larp” and “There are other larps out there, but I prefer this one” (cited in Vanek, 2011). Vanek (2011) believes that this latter view represents the opinions of the majority of U.S. larpers.

Social identity theory might help explain this tendency toward elitism regarding one’s preferred game. Individuals attempt to assert their gaming group as superior, establishing themselves as part of the “in-group” versus members of the “out-group” (Ahmed, 2007). This tendency may also reinforce the “third-party hypothesis” that one’s subcultural activity is somehow less aberrant than that of a hypothetical third party and, thus, less worthy of scorn from outsiders (Bowman, 2010). An example of this tendency is the popular Internet meme “The Geek Hierarchy,” where

individuals from various subcultural activities are humorously ranked in a flow chart according to their perceived level of “geekiness,” with virtual gamers and other role-playing gamers ranked as “less geeky” than larpers (Sjöberg, 2002). Ultimately, elitist beliefs intensify divisions between role-playing communities, impeding potential collaboration.

Participants repeatedly cited problems between players in intimate relationships affecting the game as a whole, particularly with regard to courtship, jealousy, and breakups. In-character romances sometimes induce bleed emotions towards other players, which might cause role confusion or disrupt existing relationships. Ultimately, the findings in this study do not indicate that all romantic relationships produce conflict, but that in-character and out-of-character intimacy may complicate social dynamics. Several participant reports resonate strongly with Gordon Olmstead-Dean’s (2007) observations in his informal ethnography on relationships in larp communities, where the author refers to intimacy in games as “playing with fire.”

which states that individuals tend to avoid conflict

As a counterpoint, participants mentioned long-term relationships forming as the result of players meeting in role-playing communities. These reports correlate with observations by *Vampire* game designer Mark Rein-Hagen, who receives daily emails of gratitude from long-term partners who met in-game (Rein-Hagen, 2013). Therefore, the potentially negative impacts of intimate relationships in games do not necessarily overshadow the positive interactions.

A specific feature of the role-playing experience is the phenomenon of bleed, when player emotions, thoughts, physical states, and relationships cross over to the character and visa versa. Most players take comfort in the “alibi” provided by the social contract of the game, which affords them the ability to experiment with feelings and behaviors they otherwise would not. However, this alibi does not always protect the players from lasting psychological distress. Tobias Bindsløt and Pernille Shultz (2011) encourage players to give themselves

permission to admit to negative impact from emotional bleed and to develop the courage to share their experiences with others. Bjarke Pedersen (2012) calls the role-playing agreement of “what happens in larp stays in larp” a “lie,” insisting that our experiences in games do affect us as people. Pedersen advocates displaying the “guts, trust, and cooperation to have a completely open dialogue about these things” (2012).

Nordic larp and jeepform organizers often design games to produce the “rich experience” of emotional bleed (Montola and Holopainen, 2012); some players within this community have even admitted to finding bleed experiences addictive (Nilsen, 2012). Others in this group criticize “bleedhunting” and the use of the alibi of character as enabling players to do “horrid stuff because ‘it’s just a game’” (Høgda, 2012). Recently, the Nordic larp community has encouraged discussion surrounding strategies for increasing awareness and ensuring player safety in “extreme” larps (Bindslet and Schultz, 2011; Koljonen, Munthe-Kaas, Pedersen, and Stenros, 2012; Pedersen, 2012; Bowman, 2013; Koljonen, 2013).

The participants in this study describe numerous examples of negative bleed experiences that have impacted them or their community in significant ways. While a few examples arose from freeform, jeepform, and Nordic larp games intentionally designed to produce bleed in the participants, the majority emerged from more “mainstream” or genre-based styles of game. Why do players view some emotionally intense situations as “fun” after the game, whereas other situations are remembered as traumatic, inducing long-lasting negative impacts such as depression? Several participants attribute negative bleed to an over-identification with character, which results in a lack of shedding of the role, a phenomenon Fine calls “overinvolvement” (Fine, 1983). Participants explained that when overinvolved, the player assumes in-character interactions correlate with out-of-character personality traits and feelings. In addition, players may possess underlying psychological problems that events within the game world trigger or intensify.

Several participants stated that playing self-designed characters in long-term, competitive, campaign style games intensifies the potential for

bleed and over-identification. Continual online play may also prove problematic. In spite of these problems, many of my participants continue to play in these types of games, expressing ongoing enjoyment from their involvement. Again, though these game features may have the potential to create bleed-related, negative interactions, such as altercations do not necessarily outweigh the positive experiences that players gain. Understanding the potential pitfalls of involvement within role-playing communities and learning how to circumvent or cope with them will aid in communal cohesion and in the long-term sustainability of the subculture.

Efforts to expand this research are underway. A future paper will detail a cumulative list of pre-, during-, and post-game strategies that help diffuse social conflict, including workshopping, debriefing, and off-game socializing (Bindslet and Schultz, *Playground*, 2011; Bruun 2011; Koljonen, Munthe-Kaas, Pedersen, and Stenros, 2012). Another paper will further explore the effects of long-term, immersive involvement in competitive role-playing games. The researcher collected intensive focus group data on White Wolf larps with sociologist Ian Mosley at the Atlanta by Night convention in 2012 and plans to follow up with Internet-based research on various forums. In addition, the researcher is helping develop a quantitative survey that will further measure the incidence of the above-listed issues in several countries. Headed by Michał Mochocki, the research team plans to launch this survey in mid-2013 with the text translated into multiple languages. Ultimately, these studies aim to help players understand the sources of conflict within their communities and find constructive solutions for social problem solving.

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APPENDIX A

Questions for Participants in the Social Conflict and Bleed in RPGs Ethnography:

1. What kinds of RPGs do you regularly play? (Include tabletop, LARP, and virtual if they apply).
2. What kinds of RPGs have you regularly played in the past but no longer play, such as long-term Chronicles/campaigns or one-shot immersive LARPs?
3. How often do you play with one particular group of people and in what context/genre? Be specific.
4. Do you consider yourself part of a role-playing community with the people in your RPG group(s)?

5. "Bleed-out" occurs when someone's emotions/relationships/physical state in the game affect them outside of the game. Describe examples of conflict you have experienced within RPGs that have "bled-out" to real life interactions. Use multiple examples if possible.
6. "Bleed-in" occurs when someone's emotions/relationships/physical state outside of the game affect them in the game. Describe examples of real life conflicts you have experienced that have "bled-in" to in-game interactions. Use multiple examples if possible.
7. What do you think were the main reasons behind the above mentioned conflicts? Reasons can be both explicit and unconscious.
8. How did these conflicts resolve? Examples include the dissolution of the game, the ousting of particular players, in-character resolution, out-of-character resolution, group resolution, personal resolution, intervention by organizers or other players, etc.
9. What do you think are the best strategies for dealing with interpersonal conflicts in RPGs?
10. Do you think certain types of games set the stage for more conflict than others?
11. Can you distinguish between "good" conflict and "bad" conflict? In other words, do you think some conflict is healthy for players and the group?
12. Bleed can sometimes be experienced as pleasurable or cathartic during game play. However, sometimes the intensity of the emotions experienced during game can cause lasting psychological distress after the game has finished. Do you have any suggestions for people experiencing negative bleed from the intensity of their experiences with role-playing games?
13. Can you describe player behaviors that enhance feelings of connection and community within the group and help resolve disputes?
14. Can you describe player behaviors that intensify conflict and cause splintering within the group, creating and escalating disputes?
15. Add any further comments/observations you would like to make.

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Cultural Languages of Role-Playing

Popular Abstract - Role-play interaction in live role-playing games is also language interaction. Role-playing language is different from everyday language, because the worlds created in role-play are not just a reflection or extension of everyday life. We examine three examples of interaction in live action role-playing games. In all three, players rely on shared cultural knowledge. In the first example, two players employ the cultural conventions about the meanings of colors, objects and space as well as materials borrowed from myth and folklore in order to enact an encounter between a mage and a dragon. In the second, the organizers enact scenes from literary classics in order to construct the game plot. In the third, the players employ cultural stereotypes of personalities and behavior in order to present characters of diverse age and social status.

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore the links between live action role-playing games as cultural systems and the cultural context in which they exist, by analyzing the materials employed in the process of role-play interaction: the functions and uses of cultural codes, cultural memory, and cultural concepts of identities. Three cases of specific larp communicative interactions (named *Scenes*) are analyzed from different perspectives. In the first Scene, the players use cultural codes and conventions in the semiotic construction of an imaginary event: an encounter with a Dragon. The participants reach for diverse cultural segments which contain interpretations of the theme to borrow semiotic materials, therefore the role-play

becomes a medium for active reproduction and transformation of cultural information, identified as belonging to different cultural systems. Live role-playing also is a means of utilizing 'stable formations' of cultural memory, as discussed in the second Scene's analysis. Fragments of literary classics are not only reread and rewritten in the collaborative interpretative endeavor, but are also internalized, and become part of personal biographic experiences. The communicative interaction in a role-playing session is based on cultural stereotypes of speech and behavior that project personalities and roles; that is the focus of analysis in the third Scene. Regarded as abstract systems, cultural codes, cultural memory, and cultural concepts of identities constitute the cultural languages of role-play.

1. INTRODUCTION

Game studies examine games as interactive environments; games are interactive to the degree that it is a tautology to use the expression 'interactive games' (Mayra 2008, p. 6). Playing happens through communication: no interaction is possible without the exchange of information, be it direct or mediated by a technology, synchronous or asynchronous, among players or between a player and an interface. Depending on the type and design of the game, interaction may be rich or relatively limited (see e.g. Manninen 2003), respectively building upon communication that is complex and multi-channel or simplified. Inasmuch as the nature of interaction and the particularities of the communication it is based on describe the specifics of the concept of 'medium,' they can also define the various forms of playing in the system of role-playing games.

The communicative interaction in a role-playing session is based on cultural stereotypes of speech and behavior that project personalities and roles

Live role-playing games (tabletop and live action) involve collaboration between players through face-to-face social activity, relying on direct and synchronous communication. In tabletop role-playing games, the interaction is mostly verbal, and the prevalent communication tool is natural oral language². It was Gary Alan Fine who first (1983) pointed out, "Because gaming fantasy is based in shared experience, it must be constructed through communication" (p. 3). In the communicative process of the game, participants have the opportunity to mobilize all real-life tools for verbal expression of thoughts, emotions and images during the collective enactment of their 'shared fantasy.' Sean Q. Hendricks (2006) argues that language is a tool for both creating the imaginary game world and involving the participants in it. He explores various 'incorporative discourse strategies': the use of first person pronoun as a strategy for blending the player entity with the character entity; the use of popular culture references as a strategy for strengthening the shared vision of the game world and narrowing its possible variations; and the use of world-specific language forms as a strategy for

securing players' involvement by claiming the language of the fantasy world as their own. A comparative study by Tychsen et al. (2006) demonstrates that the need to visualize the fictional world through language communication encourages role-playing in tabletop (pen-and-paper) games, and they appear to be more engaging or immersive than computer role-playing games, where the players distance themselves from the virtual world.

On a more abstract level, Montola (2008) distinguishes between 'game world' as a collective construction and 'diegesis' as the subjective reading and interpretation of the game world, complemented by internal ideas and feelings which remain implicit. Thus, he introduces the subtle yet important distinction between *intersubjective* and *intrasubjective* aspects in the creative process of role-playing. He then conceptualizes the interconnection between the two sides in the communicative system, the interpersonal and the personal one, as a loop of three basic activities: interpretation, adjustment, and communication. Thus, "the fictional world or *the truth* about what exists in a fictional world" (Montola 2003, p. 82) is not a clear and stable entity, but an (at least partly) shared understanding, achieved in an uneven and complicated process of negotiation and (dis)agreement. As Kristian Bankov (2008) points out, truth is not part of things per se; truth requires assertion, which is a discourse. The game world and the diegeses are not only discursively constructed; they are subjected to transformations due to the discursive activity of the players.

This study concentrates on the *interpersonal* aspects of arguably the most complicated and hardest to generalize and analyze game interaction: the one in live action role-playing games (larp). In larp, communication is heterogeneous; interaction is multimedial. Visual messages comprised of shapes and colors supplement verbal and paralinguistic (i.e. through intonation, volume or pitch) interaction. Players may communicate only with gestures, or express themselves through song and dance (see e.g. Fedoseev and Kurguzova 2012). The design of the space, sets and props and their interpretation and usage are also part of the communicative exchange. The engendered messages (or *texts*) are not only verbal; they are also to be seen in the broad semiotic sense of the term: gestures and body postures, exclamations, songs, music and dance, costumes, images,

different kinds of objects and their usage. Lotman (1980) would say that they form a *semiotic ensemble*.

In this complicated communicative process, language is not merely an interaction tool. The language of role-playing is not an external layer on top of the essence of role-play; every role-play interaction in its communicative form is language interaction. Yet role-playing language is different from everyday language, because the worlds created in role-play are not merely a reflection or extension of everyday life; they are *fictional*. The essence of role-playing lies in the endeavor to be someone else, and/or at another place, and/or at another time, and quite often that necessitates a simulation of a world very different from the everyday one; the knowledge of that world is outside the range of the individual live memory and is unavailable to players' biographic experience. In a process of discursive construction of fictional entities, everyday language is not sufficient. If larps are temporary worlds superimposed on the everyday world (Stenros 2010, p. 300), their discursive manifestation must employ semiotic superstructures built upon natural language.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Numerous researchers who have studied role-playing games discuss the tendency of players to incorporate into the interaction process elements or materials borrowed from various cultural systems. In his seminal work *Shared Fantasy*, Gary Alan Fine (1983) notes, "Each gaming group interprets, defines, and transforms cultural elements in its sphere of knowledge into the cultural framework of an imagined society" (p. 2). Players do not create fantasy worlds entirely from their imagination; rather, they shape and add an additional level of meaning to cultural materials derived from their background knowledge. The members of a group *use* culture to imbue the events in their world with meaning and to create newly meaningful events; thus every gaming group is an interpreter of the larger culture of society within the context of which the group exists (pp. 238-239). Daniel Mackay (2001) argues that such cultural elements are the building blocks of the role-playing performance. Everything, from day-to-day interaction with others who leave impressions on the players, to memorable images culled from the players' experience with art, can be used to create their characters. Famous lines, quotable postures, vivid

traces from literary passages or film scenes are stored in the players' memory as decontextualized 'fictive blocks.' Every player's performance can be a conscious manipulation of tropes and conventions or an unconscious replay of fictive blocks to which players have been exposed. Once divorced from their context, fictive blocks function as strips of imaginary behavior—nonreal behavior that takes place in an imaginary environment—and are the very substance of play (pp. 76-79). Similarly, Sarah Lynne Bowman (2010) observes that the content of role-playing game narratives "often emerges from deep, archetypal symbols cultivated from the wells of collective human experience" (p. 13).

This study elaborates on the notion of a link between the role-playing game as a cultural system and the cultural context in which it exists, by analyzing the cultural materials employed in the process of role-play interaction. Studying concrete examples, we will discuss the incorporation of diverse 'cultural elements' into larp communication. We will examine them as abstract systems of elements and rules for their usage in the communication process, i.e. as languages. Our focus will be not so much on the elements themselves or their origin, but on their interpretation within the specific communicative situation, their semantic interlinking in the creation of new meanings. The slipperiness inherent in such a discussion stems from the character of the analysis: it examines not exclusively verbal elements, but the entire multimodality of role-play interaction. To borrow from Frans Mayra (2008): "In the context of game studies, it is just as important to think about meaning that is related to actions, or images, as it is to find meanings in words" (p. 13).

3. KEY CONCEPTS AND METHODS

Influenced by the works of Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev about primary (literal, 'denotative') and secondary (figurative, metaphorical, 'connotative') uses of words and expressions, Roland Barthes (1972) and Juri Lotman (1970), arguably independently of each other, elaborated the notion of secondary semiotic systems. According to it, on top of natural language—the basic semiotic system through which we communicate—we build additional, more or less conventional systems of meaning, serving to organize and express our social experience. In his conclusion to *Mythologies*,

Barthes defines myth as a *second-order semiological system* (in French, *système sémiologique second*), where different raw materials (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.) are used as a secondary language for the expression of additional, ideological meanings.

This notion also permeates Juri Lotman's works of cultural semiotics. Lotman views the entire culture as information, collected, stored and transferred in every human society, from one generation to the next. Culture is an aggregate of texts, wherewith collective memory is stored; culture is a system of communication where texts are exchanged via diverse channels; culture is a mechanism of text-creations, and texts are the realization of culture (Lotman and Uspensky 1978). All of culture's texts could be read and comprehended with the assistance of cultural codes, which are the bases of different cultural 'languages.' Each cultural text can be considered a single text with a single code and simultaneously an aggregate of texts with a corresponding aggregate of codes (Lotman 1967). Lotman pays particular attention to art and the 'languages' of literature, theater, cinema, fine arts, music as systems for communicating specific artistic information, which are similar to natural language, but much more complex, since they are constructed upon it and serve as *secondary modeling systems* (Lotman 1970, 2002).

However, 'language' and 'code' are not synonymous:

"The term 'code' carries with it the idea of an artificial, newly created structure, introduced by instantaneous agreement. A code does not imply history, that is, psychologically it orients us towards artificial language, which is also, in general, assumed to be an ideal model of language. 'Language,' albeit unconsciously, awakes in us an image of the historical reach of existence. Language—is a code plus its history." (Lotman 2009, p. 4)

If a language consists of a code and its history, the discussion of 'cultural' languages must involve the idea of culture as *memory*. In their seminal work "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture" (1978), Lotman and Uspensky define culture as *the nonhereditary memory of the community* (p. 213). Culture is a mechanism for preserving information in the consciousness of the community. The longevity of texts forms a hierarchy within the culture, one usually identified with the hierarchy of values. The texts considered most valuable are

those of maximum longevity: the panchronic texts. Aleida Assmann (2008) subsequently distinguishes between two forms of memory: a more active one, the institutions of which preserve the *past as present*, and a more passive one, which treats the *past as past*. She refers to the actively circulated memory as the *canon* and to the passively stored memory as the *archive*. Jan Assmann (1995, 2008) introduces another distinction in his works—between two different ways of remembering: communicative memory and cultural memory, which he illustrates with his metaphor of the 'liquid' and 'solid' states of the collective memory. Communicative memory is not formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization; it is diffuse and lives in everyday interaction. Cultural memory is characterized by its distance from the everyday; it is mediated through texts, icons, dances, rituals and performances of various kinds; it has 'stable' formations to guarantee the objectivation or crystallization of communicated meanings.

Live role-playing constitutes a second-order semiological system due to the very nature of "playing make-believe." It borrows a wide gamut of raw semiotic materials (words and phrases, postures and gestures, rhythms and melodies, symbols and images) and *models* them, assigns an additional, secondary meaning to them in the act of playing a role. This system is characterized by fusing two features: 'theatricality' and 'interactivity'. Theatricality is a fundamental semiotic feature of dramatic performances; its definition is based on the observation that all theatrical signs function as *signs of signs*. On the stage, the crown and the ring are not symbols of royal power; they are signs of the symbols of royal power, to the same degree as the regal gestures of the actor performing the role of the King. Theatrical signs show *mobility* (i.e. they are mutually substitutable), and *polyfunctionality*. For example, the rain could be indicated by sound, props or words: with the noise of falling rain drops, with an open umbrella or merely saying, "It's raining"; a chair can be used not only as a sign of a chair, but as a sign of a mountain, staircase, car, or sleeping child. Every theater sign can perform multiple functions to create a wide variety of meanings (see Fisher-Lichte 1992, pp. 129-141). Just like in a theatrical performance, in live action role-play, "every object in the physical space and every act performed is a sign" (Loponen and Montola 2004, p. 42); but the crucial difference here is that

they are involved in “a cycle of creation and consumption” (Sandberg 2004, p. 276), i.e. in a meaning-generating process of direct interaction. The participants in a larp event more often assume the active roles of interlocutors than the positions of performers/audience. The meaning of every message in larp is produced by the communication among participants *in acting together* in a particular situation.

every object in the physical space and every act performed is a sign

Interpreting role-playing as a secondary modeling system allows us to avoid two potentially reductive notions. The first one holds that the inclusion of diverse cultural materials in the communication process is a mere reference, ‘quoting,’ which preserves their original meaning intact. Viewing role-play as a modeling system lets us regard the cultural elements in it as a *language*, an abstract set of signs whose use is sometimes partly unintentional, often improvised and spurred by the concrete situation, and whose meaning has not been pre-established but is created jointly by the participants in the role-play discourse. The second notion claims that the origin of these elements should be sought only in certain texts and genres of popular culture, such as Dungeons and Dragons, fantasy literature or sci-fi films. The borrowing of elements that may serve as codes in the role-play interaction can, in fact, happen across a large variety of sign systems to which the players have *access*, so we are going to discuss them under the general umbrella of *cultural codes*, *cultural memory* and *cultural notions* of identities.

The cases that we will examine, called Scenes, have been extracted from Bulgarian larp games. They have been documented during field work through qualitative ethnographic methods such as participant observation, audio and video recording. The approach is based on ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and ethnography of speaking (Hymes 1974) and their interest in how people interact and maintain social contacts; how they use language to create and sustain realities. A methodological disclaimer is necessary here: although the interpretation has generally been verified in post-game discussions with participants in the relevant larp event (particularly in Scene 2), it still remains a largely

subjective interpretation of the researcher. Other interpretations are possible for anyone else who is a native speaker and is familiar with the peculiarities of Bulgarian larp culture.

The analysis of the three chosen cases will be performed on different levels; the analytic approach is based on the extensive research of Teun A. van Dijk on discursive *macrostructures*: the higher-level semantic or conceptual structures that organize the local microstructures of discourse, interaction, and their cognitive processing (see e.g. Van Dijk 1980). In the first scene, an interaction between two role-players will be discussed as a sequence of communicative acts, i.e. as a narrative macrostructure (Van Dijk 1976). In the second scene, a whole larp session will be viewed as a global communicative event inasmuch as the two sides of the communicative process are two groups (macro participants): that of the organizers and that of the players. In the third scene, we will go down to the level of conversational analysis but will bring into consideration another concept: that of *context models* as subjective representations of social situations (Van Dijk 2007):

“Context models strategically control discourse processing, in such a way that a discourse is produced or understood as *appropriate* in a given communicative situation. This means that anything that can vary in discourse may thus become controlled by the context model, such as deictic expressions, politeness formulas, style, rhetorical structures, speech acts, and so on” (p. 7, original emphasis).

4. SCENE ONE: MAGE AND DRAGON

At the periphery of the gaming area, in a dank wooded section, a party of players comes across a single NPC. The NPC wears a bright-red dress, with beads and ribbons, just as brightly red. She is hostile and tries to scare the party off; she spits and hisses. Only when confronted by one member of the party, carrying a staff and wearing pendants made of leather, wood and seashell, does she calm down. The beginning of the encounter acts as an introduction: the two introduce themselves as a Mage and a Dragon. The Dragon speaks in cadences and with odd syntax, reminiscent of poetry. The Mage divulges his aims: he must cross the Gates of the Otherworld, but for that he needs a scroll of magic runes. The Dragon admits she holds the scroll, but is only inclined to give it up if the

² The Aschkolt Affair 2008: Ertan Musov et al. The 28th of June, Varna, Bulgaria. Field notes.

Mage tells her more about the world of humans or if he finds a way to divert her. The Mage accepts the challenge and decides to sing a folk song to the Dragon. The Dragon approves of the song and the performance, and gives the scroll to the Mage. The Mage thanks her, the Dragon wishes him success and both take their leave².

Eirik Fatland (2006) writes about “a vast array of cultural ideas,” learned from personal experience, from books, from playing games or watching films, which serves as a pool of knowledge from which role-players draw improvisational patterns. Fatland defines these patterns as “interaction codes” and systematizes some of them into two types: codes of convention (conventions of genre and reference, conventions by situation, conventions of larp scenes), and codes of design (spoken language, body language, stereotypical characters and stories, etiquette and social rituals). In the scene described above, we can identify some of the cited codes of interaction, e.g. the rule that only mages can speak with dragons, which is a convention of “high” fantasy familiar from Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* novels; the meeting between the participants begins with an introduction and ends with farewells, two mandatory features of social etiquette; the party's insistence to communicate with the dragon is necessitated by conventions within the Bulgarian larp scene that NPCs are meant to serve players, as a source of information and items.

Before verbal interaction has even begun, the two players, through codes of color, objects and behavior, have signaled to each other what they are. The freshly created visual text has an entirely fictional denotatum: one player recognizes the other only by the force of cultural convention: red symbolizes fire and dragons are creatures of fire; they are serpents, hence the hissing and spitting; a staff and pendants are the paraphernalia of mages and so on. Within the players' verbal interaction, a specific “singsong” language is established: on the one hand, the Dragon's odd speech, rhythmical, characteristic of the magic creatures in Bulgarian fairy-tales (Parpoulova 1978); on the other hand, the Mage's choice of song with which to “tell the tale” about the world of humans. The text emerging from this “singsong” language is itself a complex sign: a sign for an uncommon kind of communication, a magical interaction. It is based on shared mythological conceptions; we could say that this interaction's presupposition is the mythological code, according to which one needs

magic to cross over to the Beyond and creatures like the Dragon inhabit the margins of the human world. In that remote space, the Dragon guards the gates to the Otherworld; she is alien to people and they to her, and that is why she needs to be told a tale about them, which the Mage does in his capacity of mediator, of intermediary between the world of humans and mythical beings. The narrative follows a familiar storyline. It is subjected to the narrative code of the fairy-tale: the Dragon is a magical helper and grants a magic item to the hero, but first she must test him; the Mage has to fulfill the task and pass the test to earn the magic item: functions XII, XIII and XIV according to Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968).

The role-playing game transforms into a milieu for the existence and recreation of inherited cultural information

The participants reach complete agreement: the interaction is successful. Separate elements are combined eclectically: semiotic material of diverse provenance is freely borrowed and structured. The borrowing is not arbitrary but follows the theme “*encounter with a Dragon*”: the interlocutors reach out for every cultural segment they can think of that contains interpretations on the theme: fantasy literature, role-playing games, mythology, and folklore. The role-playing game transforms into a milieu for the existence and recreation of inherited cultural information, known for its different cultural origins but shared by all participants in that particular communicative event. Communication takes place on two levels: on the specific one, between interlocutors, and on the abstract, between various texts within a culture and between different cultures—“different” in the sense given by Lotman about the typology of cultures: remote either in time or in space. The mosaic's every and any element is acceptable, from the viewpoint of the participants trying to achieve their aims—if it is comprehensible to the interlocutor. What is more, because of the tension in each created syntagmatic bond, the communication is guaranteed to take place *here and now*, as a dialogue spontaneously and jointly creating new meanings, and not as a set of monologues fitted to one another to create meanings in a premeditated manner.

The interaction between the two players is completely impromptu, and their participation is spontaneous, a direct response to the partner's actions. The genre of the narrative jointly created by them can easily be recognized as fantasy, and that is probably why it contains the archetypes foregrounded by folktales and mythology (see also Bowman 2010, pp. 143 – 154). Equally easily, it can be recognized as part of Bulgarian larp culture, not only because of the natural language of the interaction, but also because of the inclusion of elements from local folklore. By actively drawing in heterogeneous cultural information and binding it together to produce meanings, larp players situate their micro-culture along the borders of the cultural semiosphere (as per Lotman 2005), an area of enhanced meaning generation. A global phenomenon, which has incorporated the traditions of popular literary genres like fantasy and also the features of the North American gaming culture, meets, absorbs and is realized through the texts and codes of the local culture, "forming a kind of creolisation of semiotic structures" (p. 211). Using the foundations laid by Lotman, we are aware that this binding cannot take place mechanically; it is always an interpretation giving birth to new meanings. Building imaginary worlds is possible only in interpretation, because even the most fantastical worlds have always been mediated through languages very similar to ours.

5. SCENE TWO: MASKS AND RIDDLES

The hall is festively lit, a string orchestra plays. At the end of the hall, the ball's host, Don Delgado, sits. Two of his mysterious companions stand at his sides: a tall man in a top-hat and a beautiful girl. The third companion stands at the hall's door and asks all guests to present their invitations and tell their name and title. After that he loudly announces their arrival. The guests enter the hall and patiently wait for their turn to introduce themselves to the host. All are in evening-dress, all are masked. Don Delgado bids them welcome, kisses the ladies' hands, but does not stand from his chair even for a moment. His tall companion repeats the same compliment over and over: "We're delighted", "The Don is delighted", "She is delighted", "We all are delighted"².

To fans of Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* who took part in the larp game "The

Spring Ball of Don Delgado", the beginning of which is described above, these compliments along with the three mysterious companions' names—Azazelo, Korovieva and Behemoth—are enough to make them exercise extreme caution and avoid interaction with those who play the aforementioned parts. Less than pleasant things befall the others.

About two hours after the start, the host Delgado announces a small performance—a puppet show—for his guests' entertainment, which lovers of *Hamlet* follow with particular attention. In verse, the puppet play tells of how once upon a time poor young Delgado, very much like the Dumas character, the Count of Monte Cristo, was accused and convicted so that his fiancée could be taken from him. The show causes angry reactions from the guests depicted in it.

During the game everyone's life depends on whether or not they will discover that their cordial host has sold his soul to the Prince of Darkness—whether or not they will manage to follow the dialogue between two texts: Bulgakov's novel and Goethe's *Faust*—and also if, with the help of a special cipher, they can find and destroy the blood-bound covenant. To acquire the cipher, comprised of Bible references, however, they have to answer a riddle: "What is this which is so high, yet so low?"

The larp game's design includes elements from works within the European literary *canon*. Each element is intended to carry a particular meaning, inciting a particular reaction in the players. Together these elements form a specific *literary code*, comprised of signs that, in the spirit of the game, we will call *masks*. In this case the creators rely mostly on the participants' skill to build associative connections, to *associate*, which is the loosest form of encoding. The ensuing decoding sets going interpretative processes that move in too many different directions, causing players to have a number of mutually contradictory expectations.

The social-romantic collision, or the mask "The Count of Monte Cristo," is associatively connected with the expectation of *revenge*, but at the same time it excludes the presence of "supernatural" characters and events. To recognize that the three mysterious companions are *demons*, or the mask "The Master and Margarita," creates expectations of a Good vs. Evil type of conflict, entailing an ethical choice (or affiliation); but the public revelation of past sins, being *exposed* in verse, or the mask "Hamlet," introduces a hesitation whether

³ The Spring Ball of Don Delgado 2010: Lyubomira Stoyanova et al. The 17th of April, Sofia, Bulgaria. Field notes and video record.

dividing lines in the conflict are clean-cut. The literary code brings with it a web of (con)textual connections: each element is interpreted not only in the game's context, but also within the text from which it is taken. The choice of these works is not arbitrary: classics are overinterpreted and in them each element is a sign rich with connotations.

Literary associations are "the riddle's components," whose solving makes up the *gaming aspect* of this larp event, initially proclaimed to be a "social gathering." The game is one of wits: for the creators, it is about posing "riddles," and for the players, it is about finding all the answers, which are deliberately complex, resistant to simple and unambiguous interpretation. The multiplicity of readings, the way they contradict one another, the interpretative uncertainty cause and keep the suspense, until the "masks fall" and the sides become clear. In other words, the loose system of encoding and the weak congruency ensure the game's tension. Making sense of the literary *masks* becomes a basis for the agonistic relationship between creators and participants. What makes "The Spring Ball of Don Delgado" a *game* is the game of interpreting literary code. The solution does not follow a linear logic; on the contrary, different interpretations of the literary references undermine, cancel out and even contradict one another. The result, however, is a coherent role-playing text (as per Stenros 2004). A reconstruction of the *text* must include an intertextual mosaic of literary works, amalgamated within the dynamics of discursive interaction and (re)written in a collaborative interpretative endeavor. For the larp-session's limited duration, parts of these classics have stopped existing as fossilized text and are brought to life in the pragmatics of immediate interaction.

Experiencing classic works first hand destroys the vertical gaps in culture

If we turn to Jan Assmann's terminology, we could say that we are witnessing a transformation of cultural memory into communicative memory. Textual elements from stable, "objectified" forms of cultural memory, carrying "crystallized" meanings, are brought into and reconstructed inside a particular context. They, however, are not interpreted as *canon*; after their *liquefying*, the players are *immersed* in them, experience them *first*

hand, as if they were a part of mundane everyday reality. Particularly, we see fragments of classics incorporated into the personal biographic experience of the participants.

Both Aleida Assmann's (2008) notion of *canon* and Jan Assmann's (2008) descriptive definition of cultural memory refer predominantly to texts, symbols and practices attributed to "high" or elitist culture. The hierarchy of values established through the panchronic texts of the canon and the participation structure of cultural memory, which is never strictly egalitarian, entail somewhat distant, cultivated, and ritualized modes of reception and interpretation. Experiencing classic works *first hand* destroys the vertical gaps in culture and, on a more abstract level, we see how during this larp session, "high" culture is assimilated into popular culture. The *canon* is articulated in the formal languages of role-playing; its characters and dramatic collisions are subsumed under the semantic and pragmatic macrostructures of a *game* event, and thereby (high) cultural memory and popular cultural memory (as per Kukkonen 2008) are mingled and utilized in a collectively created experience.

6. SCENE THREE: VILLAGERS AND SAMODIVA

Player A: And h-h-have you l-l-learned about animals?

Player C: Pardon?

Player A: Animals. Have you learned about them?

Player C: I've learned about people, but it is the same principle ...

Player B: So you know about frogs.

Player C: About frogs—no.

Players A and B (Sharing a look.): No? Nooo ...

Player C (Studying a piece of paper.): I know about rams ... about...

Player A: Who knows about froooogs?

Player C (Stroking his nose and chin.): The village beggar, maybe.

Players A and B (Sharing another look.): The beggar? The beeeggaar ...

Player C: The beggar often eats frogs, so I think he knows them best of all.

Players A and B, together: Thank you! We thank you!

Players A and B run away.

⁴ Legend of Taermonn 2010: The Order of the Eights. The 17th of July, Sofia, Bulgaria. Video record.

Player C: Don't mention it. (*Sits by the table, where his items are arranged, and turns to Player X, who sits opposite him.*) Please, give me your hand.

Opens a jar and with a pair of wooden pliers takes out an object which he lays upon Player X's wrist. Player D approaches and says something that's unintelligible on the recording.

Player C: In a minute, please, I'm with a patient right now, as you can see. (*To Player X.*) Where are you from?

Player X: The local woods.

Player C: The only village around here is this one, Taermonn, and I've been living here long enough to know you're not local. (*Pours some of the liquid from the jar into a small glass.*)

Player X: I'm not from a village. Who would want to live in your villages? In your woods there's more space to live than you think.

Player C: You won't disappear again, will you, like you did before with the priest? (*Using the wooden pliers, he plucks the object off from Player X's wrist and dips in into the glass.*)

Player X: Ouch!⁴

Michael Silverstein (2004) argues that cultural concepts or stereotypes of identities inform specific interactional events with an apparent scheme of social differentiation: "As receiver, one always has an 'Aha!' of recognition: 'So-and-so talks like a -!' (fill in the category of identity). And one always endeavors to project a self-identifying intersection of categorial alignments for others to discover about oneself as sender." (p. 638) The communicative interaction in a role-playing session is based on cultural stereotypes of speech and behavior that project personalities and roles. The final goal and essence of the performance is to achieve a shared perspective of "so and so speaks like so and so." It *does not* mean that role-play is stereotypical; it *does* mean role-play utilizes cultural stereotypes of "kinds of people" as tools in the performance.

Player A asks the question "And have you learned about animals?" timidly, stuttering. Player A and Player B constantly change places as communicative partners of Player C, and their actions reach a level of synchronization where they speak and gesture simultaneously and identically. These coordinated acts include odd logical connections (you have learned about people, *ergo* you know about frogs), a series of affective reactions (interest—disappointment—surprise—joy), and unhampered expressiveness. The

semantic content of that verbal interaction develops the theme of the erudition of Player C's character and his competence in the field of biological species. Through gestural and speech etiquette, Player C presents his character as a well-mannered man, very busy, but nonetheless responsive to Players A and B's persistence. Player C even starts "speaking" their language by demonstrating a kind of similar logic (the beggar eats frogs, *ergo* he knows about them).

Players A and B perform the parts of two *children*, 13-year-old Clara and her best friend Eleanor, respectively, and Player C, the part of *the doctor*, Alexander Romuald. In the scene at hand, we can conclude that the shared behavioral notions of Players A, B and C reveal the "child-like" identity by typifying attributes such as "timid, respectful, expressive, illogical," and that of the "doctor," by attributes such as "educated, well-mannered, condescending, busy." The participants construct these notions together, by observing the principle of cooperation, and verbal and paralinguistic expression is not necessarily bound by a common purpose: for example, in the first line of Player A, the manner of speech codifies her own identity, and its content, the identity of the interlocutor.

In the scene's second part, during the interaction between Players C and X, the context model is established by the participants as a certain social situation: "a visit to the doctor." The social roles are strictly defined (one is explicitly named by Player C: "patient"); behavior is also strictly defined: Player C performs a complex manipulation which Player X endures, even simulating pain; verbal interaction proceeds within the strictures of situational etiquette, including the polite form of address⁵, which Player C fails to observe in only one of his lines (a behavioral lapse). The conversation's pragmatic direction is entirely towards revealing Player X's character's identity. The theme is introduced by Player C, and his questions and comments contain the following implicature: *you are a stranger* ("I know you're not local", "you won't disappear, will you"). The subtext of Player X's answers is: *I am different* ("I'm from the local woods", "who would want to live in your villages"). The player whom we have called X on purpose, performs the part of one of the game's personified enigmas: the *samodiva*, a woodland fairy from Bulgarian folklore. Both communicative partners construct together the "different, strange"

⁵ In Bulgarian, the second person singular pronoun, coupled with verbs in the singular, is a stylistic mark of informal interaction between people who are close. Formal interaction imposes a "polite form of address," which is the use of second person plural, coupled with verbs and participles in the plural.

identity of Player X's character without directly invoking his imaginary essence.

When we think about larp communication, we have to bear in mind its twofold character, the combination of pragmatic goals and artistic sense and its possible realization as language-play (Ilieva 2010). Closely following Player C's reactions, we can discover certain characteristic acts scattered throughout the interaction's subtexts, which cannot be read and understood exclusively through the conventions of the "doctor" identity. For example, in the interaction's first part, he emphatically denies that he knows about frogs, despite the claim he has "learned about people" and "knows about rams" and that "the principle (whatever it is) is the same." Then follows an improvised if confident statement about the beggar's dietary habits. In the second part of the interaction, he inadvertently breaks behavioral etiquette by switching from the formal second person plural to the informal second person singular while addressing the presumably unfamiliar "patient." If we have to point out the utterance's subject in these cases, it would be the *playing* subject, the player having fun, and the *social* subject, the participant having a conversation with a friend and a gaming partner. The recognition of these roles is again derived from a cultural notion that brings together "playing" and "joking" or from the social convention that defines the interaction between close friends as informal.

Kristian Bankov (2004) holds the view that our identity is our "social interface" through which we communicate with others, and for this reason it is largely a function of our social networking. But the identity network in a live action role-playing event is further mediated through the theatricality: it is composed of signs of signs of identity. Cultural notions (or stereotypes) are expressed in the discursive structures as behavioral (including speech) codes, which in the process of performance are identified and recognized by both the participants and by the observers who share the same notions. Identifying the subjects of communication, answering the questions "Who am I?" and "Who are you?" takes place simultaneously with the process of communication itself; it is accomplished in communication and is sometimes its ultimate aim.

In computer role-playing games, player characters are simplified simulations, models created through a careful choice of features. The limited possibilities accentuate gender and race as *difference*; however, there are a number of different gender or race

models (Corneliussen 2008). Game developers use ethnocultural stereotypes of familiarity and otherness to design menu-driven identities (Langer 2008). But the social worlds of live action role-playing are more resistant to design; the identities presented in its discursive structures are more spontaneous, yet much more complex. The improvised performance of roles in a socially regulated environment presupposes a mobilization of the social subject, the playing subject and the fictional subject (the character), which coexist at the same time in the interactive process; they are always available as options for the player. The choice and the recognition of the different roles depend on mutual clarification and articulation on the interlocutors' part. The role-playing subject is *a figure of discursive interaction*, an image created in communication, a complex sign meant to be perceived and interpreted in a particular way.

7. CONCLUSION

In the three Scenes above, we observed the integration of diverse cultural elements into the role-play interaction. In all three cases, the elements are no oblique remarks or references; they form the basis of the communication. In the first scene, the participants employed the cultural conventions about the meanings of colors, objects and space as well as materials borrowed from myth and folklore in order to enact an encounter between a mage and a dragon. In the second scene, the organizers made use of scenes and motifs drawn from the canon of cultural memory (literary classics and the Bible) in order to weave a web of puzzles whose solving forms the game aspect of the larp event. The participants in the third scene, consciously or not, employed social stereotypes of identities in the role-playing of their fictional characters. Regarded as abstract systems of codes and conventions, these elements and materials constitute the cultural languages of role-play.

Role-play is a type of cultural bricolage

Role-play is a type of cultural *bricolage* (as per Genette 1982). Every text—both as a mode of expression and as a carrier of meaning—is created ad hoc, in a collaborative process of analysis: extracting elements from various already-constituted wholes; and synthesis: combining these heterogeneous elements into a new whole where none of them retains its original meaning and

function. The extracted sign-elements are reconfigured into new dynamic structures which are also conventional (sign) structures: the player's speech and gestures represent the character's speech and gestures; the player's props and costumes represent the character's appearance; fragments of physical space represent fictional space, etc. The difference or deviance from the original structures' form and sense are *figures of interpretation*. The study of interpretation is one possible approach to the study of larp culture. If we adopt the view of culture as a *system of meaning* (see e.g. Mayra 2008, p. 13), then it is precisely interpretations and the making of new meanings

The study of interpretation is one possible approach to the study of larp culture.

that constitute the specifics of each larp culture. Even if we assume that the communicated explicit meanings are a particular case of meaning-making and much of the meaning or significance remains implicit or only indirectly apparent for an external observer (ibid., p. 14), studying the interpersonal aspects of the process is still worth the researcher's efforts, since it is they that make the fantasy *shared*.

Examining role-playing games as cultural systems (as per Fine 1983) implies that we should always place them within webs of cultural relations, in which each system element leads to other systems, other cultures, and other discourses. Nowadays, no-one takes for granted the homogeneity of a culture or the existence of a single language in which it is created, yet Ferdinand de Saussure's classical notion of systems is still useful, to remind us that nothing in culture exists separately, for itself only. Almost a century after the publication of *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), linguistics still holds the view that meaning can exist only within a system, yet in the meantime, researchers have arrived at the conclusion that a system can exist only in relation to other systems, and that each discourse in the contemporary world is always a bricolage of discourses (see e.g. Collins 1989, pp. 65 – 89). In the postmodern information world, the relation of one cultural system or discourse to others is never clear in advance, or even predictable. In a mediated world where *access* is a key concept, the notion of boundaries is often reduced to an analytical tool. Larp cultures could completely obliterate existing boundaries and

distances between texts, genres and media, to turn into a bridge between or a common ground for different cultures. Natural languages probably serve to distinguish larp cultures from one another most clearly. Larp cultures, however, are a lot more closely connected by cultural languages. By studying their similarities and differences, we could discover whether there exist universal codes of larp cultures and where they originate: maybe from modern everyday life and social relationships, maybe from the Dungeons and Dragons gaming system, maybe from *The Lord of the Rings*, or literary classics, or mythology, or fairy-tales. It does not matter whether they function as perfect languages or break down into regional dialects; if we learn to identify them, we could peer at the horizons of imagination, shared within and across cultures.

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A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framings and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-playing Games

Popular Abstract - As texts which are based on collaborative and interactive narration, tabletop – also known as “pen and paper” – role-playing games (TRPGs) are distinct in their technological simplicity. Indeed, in their traditional form all they require is the physical presence of a group of players – commonly around a table, hence “tabletop” – who collaboratively participate in developing a narrative; and a system of rules which allow resolving the outcome of situations in which different levels of chance may be involved – the need to write down statistic information making them “pen and paper”. Evidently, this apparent lack of sophistication makes role-playing games – as a clearly contemporary cultural phenomenon (cf. Punday, 2005; Nephew, 2004; Harrigan, 2007; Mackay, 2001) – stand out in the context of a world that is becoming ever more dependent on technology. All the more so, considering the persistence of TRPGs in the face of its “descendants” in other more technologically advanced media and despite what has become the popular notion of “the bigger, the faster, the better.” Nevertheless, that which occurs during a role-playing game session – the level of interactivity, player immersion in the narrative, flexibility of the rules, etc. – generally surpasses, even today, what many of its “successors” achieve. How does this occur? How is it possible; through what mechanisms do TRPGs allow such sophistication when relying solely on the “old fashioned” technologies of (hand-) writing and oral narration? Approaching these questions from the general perspective of literary studies, the following paper problematizes what can be called a “naïve view” of communication technology by addressing the complex relationship between the printed texts used for role-playing – such as rule- and sourcebooks – and the narratives created during game-play. To do so, it addresses the fundamental influence that framings, such as rules, character sheets and setting, as well as paratextual elements contained within or at the borders of these texts, such as cover illustrations, prologues and epilogues, just to name a few – have on participants’ interpretation and, most importantly, creation of TRPG narratives.

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ABSTRACT

Approaching the subject from the general perspective of literary studies, the following paper analyzes the impact that framings (as by Wolf, 1999) and paratexts (as by Genette, 1987)² contained within TRPG rule- and sourcebooks³ have on the construction and negotiation of narratives during game-play. More specifically, the text argues for an unconventional use of such elements due to the fact that they not only affect

the reception of the diegesis (once it has come into existence) but, because they temporally precede its actual creation, heavily influence player expectations and are thus decisive for the subsequent production of text. This way of using fiction to create additional fiction has relevance to forms of readership beyond RPG play (Walton, 1990) and may account for the persistence of the face-to-face game in a technologically mediated age.

1. INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of literary studies, TRPGs present us from the beginning with an intrinsic theoretical dilemma: the fact that a “proper”, fixed, “main text” is unavailable. Indeed, the actual role-playing game narratives only emerge during the game session itself and exist ephemerally within its boundaries. Nevertheless, the session can also be seen as being “tertiary”, largely the product of other texts; those that establish the broad fictional premises and the rules by which the fictional space is to be negotiated (“primary texts”); and those that establish the specific fictional premises that allow for a particular game session to develop (“secondary texts”) (Hammer 2007). But how exactly does this textual “conversion” take place? While there are several accounts on how rules enable and shape diegetic play (Punday, 2005), the function of the rulebooks *qua* books is still greatly under examined. The following paper explores their impact by looking at both the framing (Wolf, 1999) as well as the paratextual elements (Genette, 1987) contained in these texts. Furthermore, I will argue that TRPGs are a special instance of textuality in which the construction of narratives relies heavily on an *unconventional*² use of such elements. Rather than functioning solely as mediators between the reader(s) and the framed text – influencing the perception and interpretation of the latter³ – these ‘genetic’ framing devices are created *prior* to the main text, and serve thus the function of extending (multi-) authorial control over the game by actively shaping the narrations created during play. This is done not only procedurally, but also by shaping the narratives’ “story space”, its genre conventions or ‘interaction codes’ (Fatland, 2006) that players draw upon to create their contributions to play.

2. FRAMINGS AND PARATEXTS

Criticizing what he considers to be a general lack of academic research concerning framing in literary

works, Werner Wolf, has called attention to the “well known fact that literary texts, more than non-literary ones, are usually accompanied by framings referring to the specificity of the text and giving hints as to how to read it.” (1999: 102) Implicitly, therefore, Wolf proposes a specific use of framing devices (or ‘framings’) in literary texts which is to be distinguished from their function in “normal” or stereotyped speech situations. In the latter cases, “frames will be more or less taken for granted, as such situations seem to call for certain frames automatically as default settings.” (Wolf, 2006: 5) With fictional texts however, not only has the frame of reference first to be established (cf. Hruschowski, 1984) but it has to be assigned a meaning as well; In such cases, “special (additional) agreements between ‘senders’ and ‘receivers’ have to be made and signaled.” (ibid. 6) Because of the fact that the most effective framing devices are those that influence the reading of a text from its beginning, focusing on those elements which precede the main text is recommended. According to this approach, (literary) ‘framings’ are to be understood as,

“[...] easily identifiable markers [...] that exist in the immediate context or within a work of fiction *previous* [emphasis in the original] to the reader’s framing activity and indeed serve as its most important basis. These framings are or seem to be located on another level than the framed text, they contribute, for the reader, to the constitution or stabilization of a (real or imaginary) communicative situation in the literary exchange and also help him or her to select frames of interpretation or reference relevant for the work under consideration.” (1999: 103)

In addition, Wolf also points out that there are four “potential ‘agencies’” of such framing, adding to the authorial instance (‘sender’) that of the reader

¹ The references to Genette in the following paper are based on the English translation of *Seuils* (1987)

² For the purpose of this paper, I will be using mainly game material published by White Wolf due to their explicit focus on ‘storytelling’. (All material used under permission from the publisher: White Wolf © 2012 CCP hf. All rights reserved.)

³ At least in relation to their use in “traditional” literary forms.

⁴ Understood in the context of linguistic analysis, the term ‘frame’ (as by Goffman, 1974) may be described as “the sum of various factors that influence and predetermine discursive exchanges, contribute to their coherence and meaningfulness and distinguish specific discursive exchanges from other possible ones.” (Wolf, 1999: 98) As such, frames are generally equated with “a ‘speech situation’ in its broadest sense including the rules and contexts stabilizing the meaning of the discursive exchange.” (ibid.) Moreover, they are to be understood as cognitive meta-concepts that “generally function as preconditions of interpretation.” (Wolf, 2006: 5) Because of

(‘recipient’), the text (‘message’) and its context (2006: 15). Of the four, however, it is primarily the textual and contextual framings that can be directly observed and analyzed since ‘sender’ and ‘recipient’-based ones are mainly internal cognitive processes (ibid.).

Generally speaking, Wolf’s idea of a framing device appears to correspond with what Gerard Genette (1997) has defined as the paratext. The latter encompasses a wide variety of phenomena such as the name of a book’s author, titles, subtitles, footnotes, prefaces, commentaries, and illustrations; all of which, as Genette argues, surround and extend the text in order to make it available, allowing its reception or, as he puts it, to “ensure the text’s presence in the world” (1). Furthermore, because paratexts influence the way in which a text is interpreted, Genette considers them to be defined on the most part “by an authorial intention and assumption of responsibility” (ibid. 3). Accordingly, such textual phenomena may be considered to be an instance of authorial control; a point from which the author can influence the way in which his text is read.

Indeed, this fringe (the paratext), always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone not only of transition, but of *transaction* [emphasis in original]: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies) (ibid. 2)

Thus, the paratext is to be understood as secondary to the main text and as such, as “fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary, and dedicated to the service of something other than itself that constitutes its *raison d’être*.” (ibid. 12)

While useful, Genette’s notion of the paratext proves to be a problematic one as well; a fact which is not difficult to understand when considering that for him, “every context serves [in principle] as a paratext” (9). Thus, the paratext could include even background information about the author concerning such things as, for example, his age, sex, etc. (ibid. 7). Clearly, there is little value in

using a term which could “in principle” apply to almost anything. In order to avoid such recursiveness, Wolf proposes a principle of contiguity to the definition of framing while redefining the term paratext as a framing sub-category:

“[I]n contrast to Genette, for whom ‘paratexts’ comprise both ‘contextual’ and ‘textual’ framings, I would like to restrict ‘paratextual framings’, whether authorized or not, to a variant of ‘textual’ framings, namely to [those] which are parts of individual works and are positioned at their borders, but are discernible not only through their liminal position, but also, and, above all, through their function as introductory, explanatory etc. that forms the ‘threshold’ to the main text of the work in question” (2006, 20)

As Genette, Wolf also indicates that the main function of framing in literature – of which the paratext is, indeed, a prominent form – is to guide and control interpretations within the “abstract cognitive frames” presented by fictional texts (2006: 6).

Not only is Wolf’s re-definition of the term ‘paratext’ necessary, but it is also an important one to notice here, especially considering the fact that the latter has been broadly used in game theory since its introduction to the field by Mia Consalvo in her influential book *Cheating* (2007). In it, Consalvo coins the term “paratextual industries” stating that:

“I believe that the peripheral industries surrounding games function as just such a paratext. Gaming magazines, strategy guides, mod chip makers [etc.] work to shape the gameplay experience in particular ways. Those ways have played a significant role in how gameplay is now understood. [...] The central tendency remains though: the creation of a flourishing paratext has significantly shaped games and gamers in the process of creating new markets.” (9)

While Consalvo’s application of the term has proved enlightening and useful in a general sense,

as it adds an important perspective to the study of games and the seemingly endless production of text that surrounds them, a more detailed approach must acknowledge that in order to determine specific types of paratext and their functions, the particularities of the medium itself must be first put under consideration. Additionally, it is necessary to identify the nature (and location) of the primary/main text. Only then will it be possible to recognize and differentiate relevant paratexts and framings. In the case of TRPGs, such a distinction has special importance due to the complex nature of its text(s) (cf. Padol, 1996; Stenros, 2004). Since my approach to TRPGs is mainly from the perspective of literary studies, I will consider the diegetic level as the primary text of the game session². In a general sense then, TRPG framings can be understood as elements that serve to 'trigger' relevant 'meta-concepts' (i.e. frames) for the interpretation of discourses within the game's diegesis³.

3. FRAMING IN TRPGs

As mentioned previously, the lack of a fixed, "main text" or diegesis is a major difficulty for the study of the TRPG medium. However, as Hammer (2007) has proposed, from the point of view of its construction, the diegesis of the RPG session can actually be seen as being "tertiary", since it emerges greatly as a product of other texts. Where the "primary" text serves to first establish the broad fictional premises (setting) and the rules by which the fictional space is to be negotiated, the "secondary" text provides the specific fictional premises on which a particular game-session is based (plot). Correspondingly, Hammer distinguishes three types of RPG authorship: primary, secondary and tertiary. Because TRPG rulebooks exemplify how "primary authors" extend their influence upon the game, it is through them that we can better understand how the different authorial instances involved in TRPGs negotiate the shared fictional environment during play. Moreover, since both Genette as well as Wolf have stressed the importance of paratexts/ framings as an instance of authorial control over the text, the study of these elements is key to understanding how this negotiation takes place.

Additionally, TRPG rulebooks in themselves also seem to comply with several of the criteria mentioned in Wolf's definition of framings: they exist in the *immediate* context of the diegesis and, since they *precede* the actual game playing, they also exist prior to any reader/player's input or framing activity. At the same time, they are physically separated – and thus appear to be *easily identifiable* – from the diegesis of the game. Clearly, these texts guide the interpretation of in-game events, either by laying out the rules which underlie the outcome of certain actions or by providing a (fictional) context within which character action becomes meaningful.

Because TRPG rulebooks exemplify how "primary authors" extend their influence upon the game, it is through them that we can better understand how the different authorial instances involved in TRPGs negotiate the shared fictional environment during play. (3)

However, because of the fact that the information they contain may be directly adopted in the *interface* (Padol, 1996), becoming an integral part of the diegesis, the nature of such information becomes ambiguous: is it within or without of the diegesis? Or is it perhaps both? While rules are always formally external to the story, their implementation has direct effects on the in-game events; setting and plot material, for their part, are always potentially diegetic. Evidently, far from being a singular text, the rulebook comprises in itself a great amount of heterogeneous information which is relevant for different levels of meaning within the complex system of information that is the TRPG session². At the same time, not all of its components must necessarily be seen as framing devices and, even if they are, do not have the same relevance. Thus, it becomes necessary to further reduce our focus within the rulebook itself. I propose therefore a (very) general distinction of the information contained in these texts which may be roughly classified into: rules, setting information and (meta)framing devices. Because of their explicit focus on 'storytelling', I will be drawing

⁵ This distinction, however, is done mainly for practical purposes: The fact that the TRPG game session is, in itself, a multi-layered text is one that is acknowledged and the necessity of such a reduction will be justified later on.

⁶ This notion ties in closely with Ilieva's (2012) enlightening analysis of the negotiation of cultural codes in LARP discourse. My focus in this paper, however, is more directed towards the specific materiality of these triggering elements and their relationship to the negotiated, diegetic text.

examples for the most part on games based on White Wolf's *World of Darkness* (WoD) TRPG.

in their specific form - by including (or excluding) rules for certain actions instead of others – rules affect player (as well as GM) expectations for the game, thus influencing their input in the narrative. (3)

3.1 Rules

While rules constitute the basis of the textual interface that allows for multiple player interaction during role-playing games (Punday, 2005), we must ask ourselves whether these elements are merely constituents of the 'game frame' or whether they are also a framing (i.e. whether they act as frame 'triggers') of the diegesis. Necessarily, they are the first, since the idea of 'rules' is an essential part of the meta-concept 'game'²; at the same time, however, rules also allow player interpretation of in-game situations, functioning simultaneously as framing devices. In this respect, Will Hindmarch has asserted that "TRPG rules help the players and the Storyteller understand and explain how their characters, as their agents in the game world, affect and respond to the actions that unfold in the story." (51) Furthermore, in their specific form - by including (or *excluding*) rules for certain actions instead of others – rules affect player (as well as GM) expectations for the game, thus influencing their input in the narrative. Thus, the rules not only allow the interpretation of in-game i.e. diegetic situations, but also shape them as they meaningfully delimit the choices available to players from the "outside". Indeed, as Hayot and Wesp (2004) have pointed out, "those elements of the game that lay at the heart of the game's strategic considerations are also a form of representation." (410) This becomes especially evident when considering the issue of character construction (cf. Lankonski, 2004). For example, games such as those published by White Wolf not only have rules to statistically represent "physical" elements and character attributes, but also for representing a number of "inner" attributes such as personality and, most interestingly, moral values (see fig. 2.). In the case of the *World of Darkness* games, characters' personalities are depicted partly

in terms of 'virtues', 'vices' and 'morality', thus triggering the frame 'moral conflict' as a guiding interpretive meta-concept of the potential stories created during game-play. By doing this, not only does the game implicitly encourage players to create characters with psychological depth – thus creating stories which involve the portrayal of inner conflict – but, because of the nature of the attributes it focuses on, it also influences the *type* of inner conflict portrayed.

It is important to point out, however, that quantification is not necessarily the only (although it is probably the most common) mode of representation within a RPG rules system (cf. Hitchens & Drachen, 2008). An example of this is the fact that, while the 'morality' trait is indeed represented numerically, the 'virtue' and 'vice' attributes are expressed solely in qualitative form. As stated in the *WoD* rulebook, "Virtues are not extensions of a character's Morality. Rather, they are *ideals* that inform his actions and provide a framework by which he interacts with society [my emphasis]." (92)

Still, the representation (statistic or otherwise) of inner traits implies an important hermeneutic inversion regarding most other types of fiction; that is, where in conventional fiction readers may deduce and/or interpret a character's inner feelings and struggles by his actions or - itself a classic example of a framing device - internal monologues *within* the text, in TRPGs, the inner characteristics have been (numerically) fixed to guide and help participants in understanding and, therefore, playing their characters.

Fig. 1. *Dungeons and Dragons* Character Sheet (1974)

The image shows the original Dungeons & Dragons Character Record Sheet (1974). It is a form used for tracking a character's progress in the game. The form includes sections for:

- Player's Name** and **Character's Name**
- Class** and **Level**
- Experience** points
- Hit Points** and **THAC0**
- Saving Throws** for Dexterity, Intelligence, Wisdom, Constitution, and Charisma
- Equipment Carried**, including Magic Items and Potions
- Other Notes** section
- Money and Treasure** section
- Experience** section
- Background** section

 The form also includes a grid for tracking experience points and a section for special abilities.

⁷ For an in depth analysis of role-playing as a system of information, see Harviainen (2012)

⁸ In this respect, Wolf has stated that "a frame is, as a rule, designated by a single term and as such corresponds to one metaconcept but usually governs a plurality of subconcepts and expectations." (2006: 4)

This, as expressed in the *Vampire Players' Guide* represents a “convenient heuristic if a player isn't entirely certain how his character is likely to respond to a certain situation” (21). Thus, players are expected to interpret in-game situations concerning their characters in terms of a quantified/qualitative representation of inner traits. To this extent, stat sheets are clearly framing devices, but such that they not only guide interpretations but also determine to a certain extent that which they frame. It is important to note, however, that the translation of a rating into the game through character action is in itself also a matter of interpretation since not all characters with the same rating necessarily reveal it the same way. Take, for example, the trait of ‘Humanity’ in *Vampire*, a trait that represents “humankind's better, more humane and caring aspect.” (ibid. 22) The players' guide states that:

“[M]oral decay does not affect everyone the same way. Not every mortal with a Humanity of 2 [a very low rating] or less is going to become a Charles Manson, Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin. Moral bankruptcy wears many faces, and not all of them coincide with the more simplistic expressions with which we may be familiar” (ibid.)

Evidently, the way in which a trait is portrayed depends on how it is to be interpreted within the context of a specific game. Nevertheless, in-game events can also modify the statistics that represent them.

Fig. 2. *World of Darkness* Character Sheet (2004)

Thus, a “good” character might reasonably act in a way that is contrary to his “nature” – the trait only determining the *probability* of a character acting in a certain way -, resulting in a change in its statistic representation on the game level. This change, for its part, might then influence future actions of the same character. The following passage of the rulebook makes this clear:

“[M]ortals have a much greater penchant for change and growth than vampires. As living things, they are free to change their courses at any time. Mortals can “turn over a new leaf,” while vampires don't really have that option. To reflect this, mortal characters regain humanity at a different rate than Kindred”⁹ (*Requiem* 23)

This understood, one may describe the role-playing game session as a constant “interpretive loop” between diegetic and game frame⁴. This is made especially evident in the character creation process; more specifically, in the transition from the character as a statistic entity to a narrative one. Indeed, after constructing the framework of a character, all a player has are “some traits and a general sense of who [his] character might be.” (*Players' Guide* 23) However, in order to “flesh it out”, the player must be able to “make the leap from seeing the character as a collection of numbers and begin to view him as a full-fledged living, breathing individual.” (ibid.) This transition is based on a fundamental need for providing inner-diegetic plausibility. In other words, it does not suffice that character stats have been appropriately chosen from a strategic point of view – which would make sense if a TRPG were truly only a game – if they cannot be explained in a logical way from a diegetic one. Therefore, the *Vampire Players' Guide* recommends GMs (‘storytellers’) to “demand a certain degree of realism from the game [so] that players can *suspend their disbelief* and *immerse* themselves in their characters [my emphasis]” (ibid.). Failing to do so, the text warns, will have repercussions on the game as it “will never take on a feel of a shared world and [...] always feel like a bunch of people sitting around a table rolling dice.” (ibid.)

⁹ *Kindred* being the self-designating term used by vampires in White Wolf's *Vampire* setting (cf. *Requiem* 14).

3.2 SETTING INFORMATION

Setting information constitutes what can be seen as the “substance” of the TRPG rulebook; it consists of information pertaining to the fictional world that can be selectively used and introduced into the game interface². Nevertheless, unless disputed or explicitly modified during the game, the setting can be seen as an implicit agreement constituting the diegetic level’s frame of reference, i.e. the “hypothetical primary framework” on which the game is based. Thus, if the discursive interface of the players is to be seen as the artifact of the role-playing game, the setting information can be considered a coding of the frame within which this discourse becomes meaningful. In this respect setting information complies with the general function of “substitut[ing], simulat[ing], modify[ing], add[ing] to, or [...] represent[ing], those frame constituents and framings which in ordinary discursive exchange are implied in the communicative situation or are agreed upon.” (Wolf, 2006: 103)

Additionally, *genre*, *theme* and *mood* indications are among the most important framings for the collaborative construction of narrations during role-playing game sessions. Clearly, the triggering of specific genre frames does not affect the reading of the rulebook – which, in itself, has no literary genre; or rather, whose “genre” is precisely that of being a ‘rulebook’ – as much as it produces expectations as to the story possibilities of the game. As a consequence, players are guided into creating narratives which are conceptually and aesthetically more unified as they follow general literary genre conventions. For example, the *WoD* core-rulebook, which comprises the basic, common setting and rule information for most of the company’s other games, is defined as a “horror game” (*WoD* 22, 23). Thus, by invoking the frame of ‘horror fiction’ the rulebook invites players to include motifs, tropes and *topoi* typical of this genre into their campaigns. The same can be said concerning its mood (“dread”) and theme (“dark mystery”). As for the latter, the rulebook states:

“While each story has its own central theme, the looming theme behind them all explores the dramatic ramifications of a world of supernatural secrets. Storytellers and players alike should be mindful of this theme when they feel the need to return to the roots of the game.” (ibid. 23)

if the discursive interface of the players is to be seen as the artifact of the role-playing game, the setting information can be considered a coding of the frame within which this discourse becomes meaningful. (5)

Evidently frames such as genre and theme serve as guiding meta-concepts within which the TRPG narratives develop. Their central importance is highlighted by the fact that they are explicitly triggered within the main text of the rulebook. In the case of *Vampire: The Requiem*, the genre – “modern gothic storytelling game” – proves to be important not only for the main theme of the game (“morality”), but also for the aesthetic associated with it:

“What you hold in your hands is a Modern Gothic Storytelling game, a roleplaying game that allows you to build chronicles that explore morality through the metaphor of vampirism. In *Vampire*, you “play the monster,” and what you do as that monster both makes for an interesting story and might even teach you a little about your own values and those of your fellows [...] The setting of *Vampire* borrows greatly from gothic literature, not the smallest amount of which comes from the “set dressing” of the movement. Key to the literary gothic tradition are the ideas of barbarism, corruption and medieval imagery.” (14)

¹⁰ Harviainen (2008) has defined this in terms of each player’s “personal hermeneutic circle” (75). Thus, the game can be considered a number of texts where “the gaming process itself can be treated as interpretation done by the participants, and analyzed as such.” (ibid.)

¹¹ Borgstrom (2007) goes even further, arguing that the setting of the actual game is *never* the same as that contained within the published book:

[T]he setting that one group plays in is not the setting that another group plays in. In effect, role-playing games in their static, published form do not describe a specific fictional world or story. They describe a large multidimensional space of fictional worlds and stories organized by unifying data (57).

¹² The following examples are indeed only a very tiny fraction of the framings available in these texts. A thorough identification and analysis of all of such elements would greatly surpass the scope of this article.

3.3 RULEBOOK (META-)FRAMING DEVICES¹²

Among the different elements of the rulebook, it is its own framing devices which present the most interesting features concerning the framing of the diegesis. Indeed, considered as an artifact in its own right, the rulebook, as any other printed text, features a variety of framing elements such as a “front and back cover, which usually displays its title and the names of its designer and publisher” (Nephew, 2004: 21). However, as we will see, these texts not only serve to stabilize the meaning and guide the interpretation of the information contained within *the rulebook itself* but, in most cases, they are directly related to the diegetic level of the game. Thus, they become meta-framings of the potential diegesis, creating expectations concerning the stories that may be told during play. Considering the fact that one of the main functions of framings is to “mark an artifact as such and distinguish it from its surroundings by indicating the special rules (frames) that apply in its reception,” (Wolf, 2006: 26) these framing devices can be said to have a *double function* by marking *two artifacts*: the rulebook proper and the textual interface produced during play.

The most evident examples of framing in rulebooks are those denominated paratexts in the narrower sense, such as titles, prologues, epilogues, illustrations, and so on. More specifically, these elements correspond to what Genette has deemed ‘peritexts’ – texts at the borders of a work – as opposed to ‘epitexts’ – those texts which are materially removed from the work in question. Among these framings, those which exist in initial position tend to have greater relevance in their influence upon reader expectations and interpretation of a text (Wolf, 1999). Evidently, because of their practically invariable position at the beginning of a text, titles are one of the primary mediators between work and reader. As such, they are one of the main instances of influence upon a text’s reception. Moreover, titles of role-playing game rulebooks are interesting cases of initial paratexts, because they do more than just referring to the content of the book that they frame. Indeed, if we consider games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Vampire* or *Paranoia*, it becomes evident that their titles say less about the books as artifacts than about the type of stories than can be told with them. As Wallis (2007) has observed,

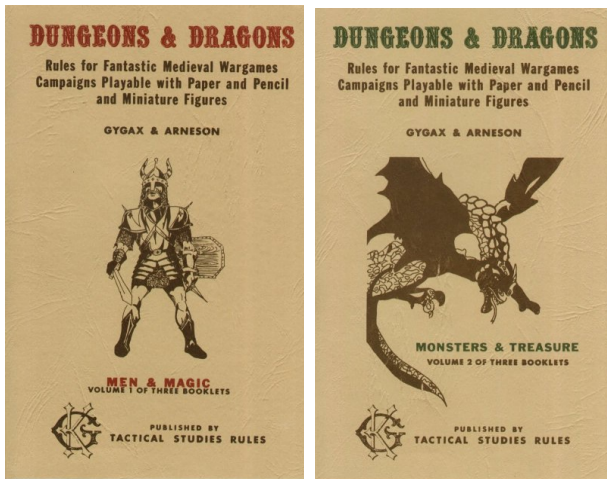
“[s]tory structure can also come from the game’s setting and the assumptions that people take from a game’s components and packaging. If you buy a game called “Kill the Dragon,” you assume that there will be a dragon and to win you must kill it, and that is the direction your play will take.” (77)

Rulebook covers are generally good examples of how different paratextual elements may be combined to create what can be seen as a unified, plurimedial framing device. (6)

This can be described in terms of the *double function* of the text’s framing devices explained previously, as they mark both the artifactuality of the rulebook as well as that of the potential interface/diegesis created by the players.

3.3.1 The cover

Rulebook covers are generally good examples of how different paratextual elements may be combined to create what can be seen as a unified, plurimedial framing device. Thus, although we can generally deconstruct them into a verbal, a typographical and a pictorial component, we must keep in mind that they function as a framing unity. Furthermore, by observing the simplicity of the original cover of the *D&D* game from 1974 (See fig. 3), it becomes evident that the aforementioned “double use” of framing devices was notoriously less prominent in early TRPGs (compare also figs. 1 & 2).

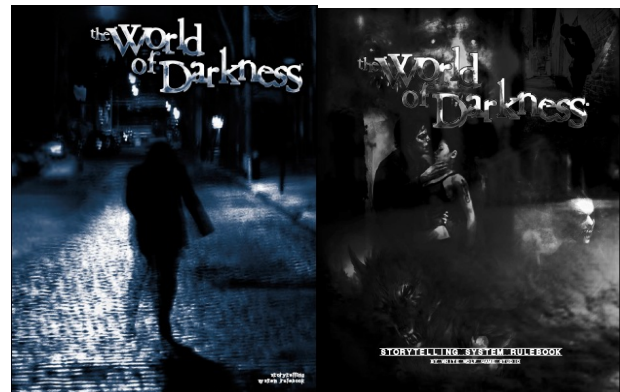
Fig. 3. *Dungeons and Dragons* Covers (1974)

Apart from the rulebook's title and illustration, it is clear that the subtitle refers primarily to the strategic character of the information contained within the text itself rather than its possibilities of constructing an actual story within the fictional world. Thus, these elements trigger the frame 'game' rather than 'narrative' (i.e. 'fiction') as the governing frame of the TRPG session. This may be contrasted with fig. 4, which shows the cover and inlay cover respectively of the *World of Darkness* core-rulebook. Although the title in itself is still relatively generic, it already conveys an ominous feeling, a certain uneasiness that relies heavily on the general association that is made between darkness and the fear of the unknown; of that which may not be seen. Were it on its own, however, the title would still leave enough space open to speculation: What kind of world is meant? What kind of darkness? Indeed, the "world of darkness" of the title could still refer to any number of settings, with "darkness" referring to, for example, evil (i.e. "dark") forces, the "dark ages" of a particular fictional world, or a particular "dark lord." However, the title could also refer to an outer space setting or to a setting where the characters are all blind. Clearly, taken on its own the title is highly indeterminate. In this respect,

although the cover illustration might appear at first glance to be a quite "literal" translation, so to speak, of the title, it is actually an essential complementary element that expands the initial premise established in verbal form. Seen from behind, a solitary human figure is shown walking down a dim lit street at night.

Fig. 4

a) *World of Darkness* Cover (Left) and b) Inlay Cover (right)



The picture is altogether full of dark shadows, with the lighter areas being merely a slight hue of blue or gray. Nevertheless, the image is actually less redundant than it seems. First of all, the "world" of the title is now portrayed as a familiar one, not a valley full of 'orcs' or a spaceship adrift in the vast darkness of the cosmos, but an alleyway that does not appear to differ greatly from those in the real world. Additionally, there seems to be a concretization of the slight uneasiness implicit in the title, now heightened and transformed into definite suspense by the almost topical motif of the lone figure in the dark alleyway. At the same time, there seems to be the implication that this now impending menace is not of a natural kind - not the "junkies" around the corner - but something more mysterious and unknown. This feeling is conveyed by the blurred and "shaky" nature of the image which resembles a badly taken picture. Within it, the objects appear to lack definite borders, giving almost the impression of "seeing double". It is precisely this idea that is further reinforced by the

¹³ A similar framing strategy has been described by Roy Sommer (2006) in the context of film analysis:

Both the design of, and the information conveyed by, the titles and credits themselves make a significant contribution to the framing process. For instance, paratextual devices such as the use of distinctive fonts in the title sequence of *Star Wars: Episode III* create continuity between this episode and the other movies of the saga. (392)

¹⁴ Indeed, later on in the rulebook we find a passage that closely resembles our interpretation of the cover:

Characters in the World of Darkness can blur the line between reality and the occult. Indeed, that's what it's all about. Exploring a world of mystery that tries to keep itself hidden. A world that punishes those who look too deep. But those who refuse to look suffer even worse. They're rocked on seas of conspiracies of which they go unaware. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. There are no easy answers, and knowing is not half the battle. It's only the first shot in a long, grinding war against the shadows. (*WoD* 23)

typographical form of the title itself (fig 5.), whose letters appear to be shifted and slightly displaced. Indeed, what appears at first almost like a printing mistake is yet another indicator of the “otherness” of the “world” presented by the game, giving the idea of an underlying, “hidden” reality. Considering the above mentioned, the inlay cover (fig 4. b) is to be seen as an extension of the front cover, answering but also expanding to a great extent the expectations previously created by it. First of all, by recurring in the same position and form, the title reinforces the idea of unity between the previous illustration and this one³.

Fig. 5. *WoD* Title Graphic



In other words, because it has not been altered, the title calls our attention to the changes in the picture. As we can observe, the slight bluish hue of the previous image has been reduced to black and shades of grey. This fact may be correlated with the absence of any source of light - in contrast to the cover where, despite the darkness, there were still streetlamps in the background. The solitary human figure, for its part, has now been replaced by several explicitly or implicitly non-human ones. Again, boundaries here are not clearly cut and the figures, as well as their background, appear only in parts, as if covered by, or emerging from a surrounding fog. It is only upon closer examination that one may spot the “odd man out” in the upper right corner of the picture (see fig. 6).

Fig. 6. *WoD* Inlay Cover Detail



Contrasting with the rest of the illustration, this image displays a clearly contoured depiction of a person – or rather his shadow – in a solitary alleyway. This image necessarily evokes the figure on the cover page and by doing so produces questions, semantic blanks that may be filled during the game: “Is he afraid? Is this what is awaiting him? Will he become - or is he already - one of ‘them’?” In a way then, the image represents a window between (front and inlay) covers and, therefore, between the “worlds” of the game.

Considering what has been discussed above, these initial framing devices can be said to foreshadow the whole concept of the *World of Darkness* setting in a nutshell⁴. This considered, the cover may be described as an “anticipatory illustration” (Wandhoff, 2006: 210) that has the function of “provid[ing] the narrative text with a moralizing maxim or theme that is encapsulated in a picture and put before the reader’s inner eye before the narrative proper starts.” (ibid. 212) Moreover, the cover triggers important frames of reference, creating expectations as to the type of narrative that can be developed during the game. As a matter of fact, one is under the impression that this framing alone is enough to engender the ideas to construct a story. In fact, as Genette (1997) has already pointed out, “a title hit upon all of a sudden, and sometimes well before the subject of the book is [...] like an instigator: once the title is there, the only thing left to produce is a text that justifies it” (67).

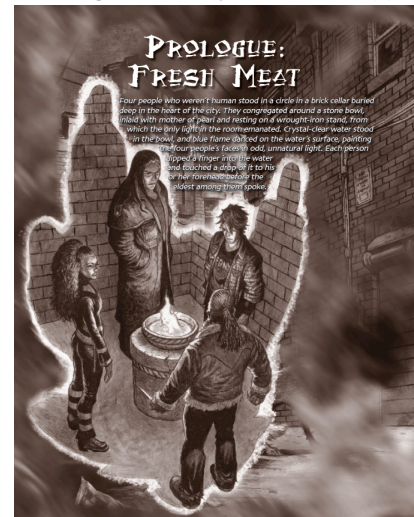
Another element of the cover page(s) which should not go unattended is the caption “Storytelling System Rulebook” which appears in the lower area of both illustrations and serves to trigger two major frames – i.e. meta-concepts – within which both the rulebook as well as the potential diegesis are to be understood: that of ‘game’ and that of ‘fiction.’ Paradoxically, by doing so, it simultaneously creates a space for suspension of disbelief by establishing that the diegetic level is based on “a set of transformation rules that indicates what is to be treated as real and how it is to be treated as real within the make-believe framework.” (Fine, 1983: 183) In other words, the denomination of a text as “role-playing game rulebook” implies the agreement “to ‘bracket’ the world outside the game” (ibid.) during play. Indeed, more than signaling its game character, the indication on a printed text as “role-playing game” may be seen as a more complex version of the original framing

used in child's play (i.e. "let's make believe"). In this last case, suspension of disbelief is easily broken as soon as disagreements between participants are encountered. However, by including more complex, rule-based framings, TRPG rulebooks allow a greater plausibility, a reality, to a certain extent, of the diegetic world. Moreover, the issue of the size of the font – notoriously small in the first cover; slightly larger in the inlay – is to be noted as well since it represents the conscious decision to foreground, in the first place, the atmosphere and tension displayed in the cover while de-emphasizing the ludic/fictional nature of the text. Obviously, this may be seen as a strategy intended to augment the suspense created by the cover, but also a framing that indicates that, while the *World of Darkness* is a game, it is a game to be taken seriously. In fact, the introduction to the players' guide to Vampire begins with the following quote by MC. Escher in its heading – indeed, yet another paratext!: "My work is a game, a very serious game" (qtd. in Vampire Players' Guide 7). At the same time, this subtitle also underscores the focus of the game in producing interesting stories rather than just fun, "escapist" adventures. Again, this is meant to influence the way in which the players create their campaigns and the stories they tell since there is no great difference – at least in principle – between how a "storytelling game" is played and how any other TRPG is.

3.3.2 Prologues, Epilogues and Framing/Embedded Narratives

Because of the explicit, salient nature that makes them clearly discernible from the rest of the text¹⁵, prologues, epilogues and "framing" or "embedded" narratives¹⁶ offer us with further examples of paratexts within the rulebook.

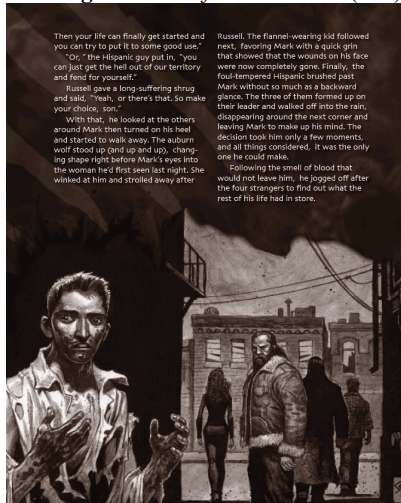
Fig. 7. *Werewolf the Forsaken* (2)



As has been previously mentioned, there is a notorious prominence of such elements in storytelling-based role-playing games. Indeed, if we go back to our analysis of the games and sourcebooks published by White Wolf, we will notice that practically all of them begin with a prologue consisting of a short narrative text that provides an atmospheric introduction into the fictional setting of the specific game. In most cases, such as *Werewolf: The Forsaken* (WF), *Vampire: The Requiem* (VtR) and *Mage: The Awakening* (MtA), the narrative is continued as an epilogue in the last pages of the book. For example, in WF, the reader is presented at the beginning with a character's (Mark) first transformation into a werewolf and the mysterious circumstances that surround it (fig. 7). In the epilogue (fig. 8), after recovering consciousness in an alleyway, Mark is approached by a group of strangers – a "pack" of other werewolves, in fact – who offer to give him answers to his new condition:

¹⁵ This explicitness is given by typographical, stylistic and spatial differences; as well as by the fact that these texts are generally surrounded by, or appear within, accompanying illustrations.

¹⁶ One must distinguish how both "framing" as well as "embedded" are to be understood: Indeed, these texts may be either embedded in, or framing, the rulebook as a text, however, this function may shift concerning the diegesis. In the latter case it is probably more accurate to consider these texts in general as framing narratives rather than embedded ones.

Fig 8. *Werewolf the Forsaken* (313)

A hard, bitter smile creased Russell's face, and he refused to back off. "First, I thought we'd answer some of your questions for you, son. Tell you a little about what you are and what it means."

"What I've become."

"No, what you are," Russell said. "After that, there's people you have to meet and some hard tests you'll have to pass. Then your life can finally get started and you can try to put it to some good use." "Or," the Hispanic guy put in, "you can just get the hell out of our territory and fend for yourself." (312, 313)

Evidently, the use of the framing narrative here creates a bridge between levels of meaning since the player is naturally led to identify with the newborn Werewolf character, Mark. Thus, the framing allows a trespassing to a certain extent of the borders between "worlds" and the invitation to Mark to "learn what [he is] and what it [all] means", becomes a beckoning to the players to take his place and investigate the setting by playing out their own adventures.

Apart from such cases of prologues/epilogues, the use of "embedded" narratives in the *WoD* core-rulebook is especially notorious. In fact, within the first 30 pages of the book, there is little mention of players, rules or characters. Instead, and after the

prologue proper, the reader is presented with a number of short, fragmentary narratives intercalated with considerations on the basics of storytelling. In general terms, these narratives serve a similar function to that of frame stories in literary texts (cf. Wolf, 2006: 179-206). However, because of the fact that the framed story – the one produced during play – is clearly the dominant text during a RPG session, the function of these texts can be described in terms of what Wolf has called '*mise en cadre*':

"In this case, rather than shed light through revelatory similarities in a 'bottom up' process – as in *mises en abyme* – the framing implicitly sheds light on the framed text in a 'top down' process. As narratology has failed to provide a separate term for this reversal of *mise en abyme*, I have proposed [...] to baptize it '*mise en cadre*'" (ibid. 198)

Furthermore, these stories, although mostly fragmentary and unrelated, not only serve the general function of establishing the mood and genre of the game – both of which are explicitly stated in White Wolf's games – but also *exemplify how these frames can be translated into narratives*.

.1(Intra-)textual, implicit framings

Although they are by far not as salient as the previous examples, intra-textual¹⁷ framings also play a central role in the interpretation of the content of the rulebook. Moreover, because they are neither statistic, nor setting information in the proper sense, these elements clearly serve a different function than that of structurally (the rules) or materially (setting information) grounding the game. Indeed, these framing devices influence how meaning is to be ascribed *within* the "primary framework" of the fictional world. While the rulebook provides a system of rules and information concerning elements, creatures and phenomena of a fictional setting, this data still portrays a fictional environment which is, to a great extent, without meaning. As Fine (1983) has observed, since the events of the role-playing game take place within a fictional 'world,' "[t]he creation of the broad outlines of a fantastic setting is not

¹⁷ Again, intra-textual refers in this case to the fact that these framing devices occur *within the rulebook's main text*, as opposed to the previous examples such as the cover, prologues and epilogues which are at its borders. As in the previous cases of embedded/framing narratives, however, it remains difficult to determine whether these framings may be considered intra- or extra-textual in relation to the session's diegesis.

¹⁸ This, of course is not a narrative instance in the proper sense, as there is no actual narration of 'events'.

sufficient to set the stage for a game.” (76) Because of this, it becomes necessary to also “establish a world view that directs the game action and represents the implicit philosophy or ideals by which the world operates.” (ibid.) This, precisely, is the main function of rulebooks’ intra-textual framings. In the following example, we may observe how setting information is intertwined with intra-textual framing in order to influence the interpretation of the diegetic reality from “within”:

The Kindred gain most of their power and strength not from their own innate abilities, but from the influence they wield in the mortal world. [...] *Why risk one’s own potentially eternal existence, miserable as it might be at times, when one can manipulate pawns into taking those risks instead?* [my emphasis] (*Requiem* 26)

Clearly, there are two types of discourse available in this paragraph. On the one hand, the first half of it consists of the stating of information from an “uninvolved”, third person point of view. However, what immediately follows it is a sentence that portrays what can be interpreted as the thoughts of a vampire within the fictional world itself. In narratological terms we could describe this as a transition of the “narrative” instance from an extra-, heterodiegetic perspective to an apparently intra-, homodiegetic one. By creating the illusion of observing the fictional world from within, this transition – a beautiful case of ‘free indirect discourse’ in fact – frames the diegetic world, thus adding new structures of meaning to it. A similar case of intra-textual framing can be observed in the next example where, after elaborating on the main characteristics concerning the vampire clan of the *Nosferatu* – a central aspect of which is the fact that they are generally repulsive, either because of their appearance, their smell, or both –, the text goes on to add

information concerning the way in which these vampires relate to other *Kindred*. If it were indeed only setting information (i.e. data) that was being conveyed, it would suffice to mention the fact that other clans generally have little to do with *Nosferatu* vampires. However, this information is again intertwined with the portrayal of “intra-diegetic” systems of meaning.

“If they had their druthers, most other clans would prefer never to associate with the *Nosferatu* at all, yet the Haunts’ [i.e. the *Nosferatus*] inarguable talents and brute force make them too dangerous to ignore. *So other Kindred offer them a tense hospitality, hide their unease behind wary diplomacies and pray that the Nosferatu leave as soon as possible.* [my emphasis]” (*Players’ Guide* 111)

Not only does this passage express the fact that *Nosferatu* are generally disliked, but expands its significance by portraying the attitude other Vampire’s have toward them and the circumstances under which *Kindred* might seek *Nosferatu* assistance. Thus, this passage reinforces overarching themes (frames) of the game such as ‘deceit’ and ‘conspiracy’.

4. CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper I have argued that a close examination of TRPG rulebooks is central to understanding the way in which these games allow for the construction of highly complex, collaborative and interactive narratives. To demonstrate their impact, I have recurred mainly to Genette’s and Wolf’s considerations concerning the specific use of paratexts and framings in works of fiction. By distinguishing three basic rulebook components – namely, rules, setting and (meta)framing devices – I have attempted to show how these elements, in addition to their main

¹⁹ As Nephew (2004) has stated, “[t]he text necessarily presents the world as incomplete and fragmentary, as no sourcebook can describe every inch of a fantasy world.” (39)

²⁰ Indeed, as he concludes in one of his reviews: “I hope I can play this one day, either with my current group or with a group I’ll have in the future” (Game Geeks #117 *Houses of the Blooded*) Doubtlessly, this type of commentary would be inconceivable in any other medium as it would appear nonsensical to seriously comment on a book one has not read, a film one has not seen, or a game one has not played.

²¹ In *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre* (1991), Wolfgang Iser establishes the necessity of reformulating the traditional notion of reality and fiction as a binary system of opposed elements by adding the concept of the imaginary. Thus, he proposes a ternary system, arguing that all fictional texts are based on the triadic relationship between the spheres of the real, the fictive and the imaginary. Because of the fact that signs, which are used to refer to real elements or concepts – understood as those of the empiric, extra-textual world –, lose their original pragmatic determination in the fictional text, while the imaginary – understood by Iser as an experience which is “diffus, formlos, unfixiert und ohne Objektreferenz” (20) – is given substance and form by the text, the relationship between these spheres is one of ‘boundary crossing’. This crossing of boundaries occurs, according to Iser, by a conscious and intentional act he has called fictionalizing act (*Akt des Fingierens*).

function, serve as framings to the potential diegeses created during game-play. In this respect, I have argued that setting and rules not only provide the structural basis to the game but that they also frame it as they invariably imply reductions of the imagined world². Consequently, by including or excluding (hypothetical) information, they create expectations concerning the playing of the game much in the same way as initial framing devices used in “traditional” written fiction. At the same time, rules and setting information affect the interpretation players make of diegetic events. Rulebook paratexts, for their part, are especially notorious for having a “double” framing function as they extend their influence from the rulebook towards the diegesis by triggering important frames within which the

During the process of gaming the players progressively reduce the space of possible stories down to a single story – one set of things “happened,” while all other sets did not.”

diegesis is to be constructed. In addition, the rulebook’s intra-textual framing devices serve to add diegetic meaning to the otherwise purely factual information given by the game setting.

In view of the aforementioned, perhaps the best way to describe TRPG rulebooks would be as a *system of framings*. However, because of the fact that the diegesis only emerges during the actual playing of the game, the framings provided in the rulebook are to be understood as surrounding a diegetic void. This void, however, is not a completely abstract nothingness but, because framing devices are conveyors of meaning, it becomes what in Iserian terms is called a *Leerstelle* or semantic blank. (In other words, a semantic blank can only exist within an established system of meaning; only within it may a semantic vacuum be “filled”.) As Henry (2009) has stated, “the existence of these fictional worlds, written without their stories, is an invitation for stories to happen.” (7) Rulebooks are therefore texts that enable the visualization of potential diegeses. One could say then, that the rulebook is also an artifact that produces an aesthetic object, the object being

the reader’s visualization of stories in potency. Indeed, Kurt Wiegel’s video reviews of TRPGs on the internet are a good example of this. Wiegel, who is an experienced game-master, discusses in short video clips different role-playing games, commenting on their playability and story possibilities. However, in many of these cases, Wiegel’s commentary is done without any actual playing experience of the game³. Likewise, it is not uncommon for players to purchase rulebooks for different games, not so much with the objective of playing them, but rather as a mode of gathering ideas – be it rules, setting or storylines – for campaigns already running in another game system. In this respect, it is important to distinguish rulebooks from proto-diegetic phenomena such as the draft of a novel. In this last case there will regularly be a single text (i.e. one story) as an outcome, whereas a RPG sourcebook may inform an indefinite number of narrations. Thus, one could argue that RPG rulebooks are to be understood as an incomplete ‘act of fictionalizing’ (*Akt des Fingierens*)⁴. Here, indeed, the imaginary has been fixed by giving it form as setting information. In fact, it has been given an additional aspect of “reality” by the introduction of rules for its transformation into statistically determined elements. However, the rulebook in itself is still not a single complete story and is, as yet, not completely ‘realized’ (*realisiert*). Indeed, “the creation of world, character, and story become “real” when experienced during the course of a game session, rather than on the reading of the game rulebook itself.” (Nephew, 2004: 39) Thus, the role-playing game rulebook is a text still imbued by the possibilities of the imaginary. It is only during game play that this *fictionalizing act* is completed. As Borgstrom (2007) has observed, “[b]efore the game begins there is a large space of possible stories defined by the initial premise. During the process of gaming the players progressively reduce the space of possible stories down to a single story – one set of things “happened,” while all other sets did not.” (58) For this reason, the expectations triggered by a rulebook’s framing devices directly influence the formation of the story. Indeed, there is no actual ‘horror’ *within* the rulebook of the *World of Darkness* but, because its framings trigger this specific genre frame, the players, as well as the GM, will be inclined to produce a text that matches what is expected from it⁵.

²² In this respect, Wallis (2007) has pointed out that “all stories must follow the rules of their genre and of storytelling in general if they are to satisfy an audience.” (78) Consequently, a “game’s mechanics must take into consideration the rules of the genre that it is trying to create: not just the relevant icons and tropes, but the nature of a story from that genre” (ibid. 73).

The system of framings constituted by the rulebook is therefore crucial in order to establish the specific 'interaction codes' and 'improvisation patterns' (as by Fatland, 2006) relevant to a given game. Equally important, however, is the fact that by doing so TRPG texts also reveal to their readers, both implicitly and explicitly, how this is achieved, inciting players to further modify or even replace them with other (framing) texts. This specific mode of self-disclosure, as well as the use of framings in TRPGs to incite the production (and not only the reception) of text is what I have called *genesic framing*. Moreover, it is this feature that is likely to account for much of the complexity of the TRPG medium as well as for its persistence in time. Indeed, despite the appearance of alternatives in more technologically advanced media, TRPGs are still unique in that participants are not only playing a (storytelling) game but, by doing so, they are also learning the mechanisms that will allow them to (re-)construct and manipulate it along the way.

This specific mode of self-disclosure, as well as the use of framings in TRPGs to incite the production (and not only the reception) of text is what I have called genesic framing.(11)

Finally, it is important to note that by focusing on rulebooks as "primary" texts, it is possible to elucidate how the different authorial instances involved in the game – primary, secondary and tertiary – extend their influence over the 'story space' beyond their specified areas of agency. If the narratives created during role-playing games may be seen as an actualization of player expectations, their (potential) fulfillment is to be understood as the result of collective negotiation. While the latter may be done explicitly, as in meta-game dialog in general, from what has been discussed in this paper it becomes evident that much of it in fact results from the manipulation of expectations and diegesis interpretation by means of genesic framing. In this respect, a description and analysis of how secondary and tertiary authors make use of such framing strategies is still a matter for further investigation.

As for now, it is possible to assert that tabletop role-playing games demonstrate the true extent to which framings are relevant in mediating works of

fiction. This is especially important if we consider the notion that all fiction is in fact a form of pretense play (cf. Walton 1990; Iser 1991; Sutrop, 2000). Indeed, much as the players' individual visualization of the game events, any aesthetic or literary work is only truly available as the individual experience of a given recipient. When communicating about these texts, negotiation through framings – interpretations, blurbs, reviews, opinions, etc. – allows us to bridge the gap between our own experience of the text and that of others⁶. Thus, not only may role-playing games teach us something about the way in which we negotiate reality (cf. Mackay, 2001) but, foremost, about how we negotiate fiction⁷.

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²³ As a matter of fact, Stefanescu (2006) has pointed out that "all comprehension of a literary work is ultimately a negotiation between the interpretive frames imposed by the reader and those suggested by the text itself." (330)

²⁴ A similar point has been made by Lopenen and Stenros (2012)

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Edu-Larp as Revision of Subject-Matter Knowledge

Popular Abstract - The paper presents theoretical foundations of the author's approach to the design of edu-larps.. It is deliberately steering away from cross-disciplinary teaching, artistic education or soft skills training in order to advocate larps tailored to single school subjects, focused on integration and consolidation of curricular knowledge. Putting larp in the context of applied drama, or Drama in Education, the text argues that well-designed edu-larp is likely to be accepted by the average teacher, not just by dedicated and trained drama educators. The concept of print-and-play "larp for dummies" downplays the importance of preparation, acting and immersion, while emphasising the game-like structure of goals and conflicts: gameplay set to work alongside role-play. Therefore, the ideas and tools borrowed from video games and board games design can be useful in the creation of edu-role plays, breeding a form which might be called 'gamified drama'. The recommended function for edu-larps is final revision of a large textbook unit, an idea discussed on the example of high-school history classes. The suggested model for classroom larp is a negotiation game between conflicted but cooperating factions, divided into three stages: a) preparation of all factions separately; b) informal meeting of all factions shortly before the official talks; c) official negotiation session which is supposed to bring forward all major (textbook-based!) issues for public debate. The paper ends with a section on troubleshooting, i.e. an overview of risk factors frequently pointed in the discussion of game-based learning, with ideas of how to eliminate or minimise the risks through careful design. Referenced sources come from the fields of edu-larp, edu-drama, game-based learning, and general educational theory.

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INTRODUCTION

This passage from *Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a Learning Medium* could be a motto for my edu-larp endeavours:

"for too long we have been concentrating on training drama specialists, a process that has widened the gap between what these specially trained persons do with groups of children and what ordinary teachers do. The time has come to show all teachers - ordinary day-in and day-out classroom teachers - how they can use drama at times to achieve something that cannot be attained as effectively in any other way"
(Wagner, 1976, p. 15).

Written initially for the *Role Playing in Games* seminar in Tampere (10-11 Apr 2012), the paper was framed as a report on edu-larp research project carried out on high-school history classes, piloted in 2010 and launched in 2012-2013 by Games Research Association of Poland and Nowa Era publishing house. In this revised version, the report part has been removed (to be completed when the project is over), and the focus switched to the theoretical foundations of my approach to edu-larp design. Referenced sources come from the fields of edu-larp, edu-drama, game-based learning, and general educational theory. My ideas go against the dominant trends in academic and professional literature on edu-larping (and broadly understood edu-drama), as I am deliberately steering away from cross-

disciplinary teaching, artistic education and soft skills training. My primary interest are edu-larps tailored to single school subjects, focused on revision, integration and consolidation of specific subject-matter knowledge from a textbook unit. In order to make larp manageable for average teachers and students, I came up with the idea of gamistic "larp for dummies": strongly orientated on task completion, while downplaying the importance of preparation, acting and immersion.

The paper contains four sections:

- (1) Context: Larp as Drama In Education,
- (2) Theory: How edu-larp works for learning objectives,
- (3) Design: A model of edu-larp for content revision,
- (4) Troubleshooting: Elimination of risk factors.

1. CONTEXT: LARP AS DRAMA IN EDUCATION

Paving the way for edu-larp to mass implementation in Polish schools, I have taken two strategic moves in order to position larp among the most desirable methods of teaching social sciences and humanities. First, demonstrate larp is a form of educational drama. Second, show it can beat the systemic obstacles blocking the progress of drama in schools.

1.1: Larp is just like drama education

To begin with, I would like to situate larp in the context of D.I.E., Drama in Education, which has a long and glorious tradition in Polish educational studies. It has been researched and promoted for over forty years, mostly based on the theories and practices developed in the UK. *Development Through Drama* (1967) by Brian Way, translated into Polish in 1990, is probably the most cited source in the works of our D.I.E. proponents. It was Way, Heathcote, Bolton and other English Drama Educators who put strong emphasis on Process Drama (as separated from product-oriented theatre), in which:

- (1) The emphasis is placed on participants experiencing personal growth through an exploration of their understanding of the issues within dramatic experience
- (2) The generated topics are explored through improvisation
- (3) Student and teacher share equal places in

the development, analysis and production of the drama

- (4) The drama is normally not performed for an audience (Weltsek-Medina 2008)

The terms 'process' or 'applied' drama have a broader meaning than D.I.E. In *Interactive and Improvisational Drama: Varieties of Applied Theatre & Performance* (Blatner & Wiener 2007) educational applications occupy only one of its five sections (beside psychotherapy, community building, empowerment, and life expansion&entertainment). However, if we narrow the focus to education itself, these names can be used interchangeably: "process drama. Often called drama in education or 'living through' drama or 'experiential drama' or applied drama" (Bowell & Heap, 2013, Kindle Locations 124-125). My preferred term is 'edu-drama'.

Larp was unheard of in this context until the development of academic game studies in the early 2000s. Probably the first Polish author to change this was Jerzy Szeja, a literature scholar, game researcher and experienced high-school teacher, who wrote in *Polonistyka* 7/2000² that the use of tabletop and live action role plays can lead to similar educational outcomes as the use of drama techniques. Later, he reinforced his view in *Gry fabularne - nowe zjawisko kultury współczesnej* ("Role Playing Games: New Phenomenon in Contemporary Culture") published in 2004, the first ever doctoral dissertation in Poland on role playing games.

My argument goes one step further. I do not say edu-larp is *similar* to edu-drama, I say it should be seen as a *kind of* edu-drama. It exhibits all features prescribed by Dorothy Heathcote for the basic model of her D.I.E. called "Drama used to explore people":

1. It works through social collaboration
2. It will always involve exploration in immediate 'now' time where participants engage with events in the first person; I do. That's the drama element.
3. It must involve participants considering one of the three levels of social politics. The psychology of individuals to drive the action, or the anthropological drives of the community, or the social politics of how power operates. These three form the

lubrication and friction which makes the work have meaning for participants beyond the ordinary and mundane.

4. It will always require some modification of behaviour so that the fiction isn't mixed up with the usual way people behave. . . .

5. The event must have focus, usually through productive tension, which has to be injected deliberately. In the early stages this is usually provided by the teacher . . .

At this level the teacher has to do the play "wrights" job - as maker collaborating with the nature of the material. (Heathcote, 2002, p. 2)

Larps also meet the definition presented in *Planning Process Drama*:

performance to an external audience is absent but presentation to the internal audience is essential. . . . this is a whole-group drama process, essentially improvised in nature, in which attitude is of greater concern than character. . . . lived at life-rate and operates from a discovery-at-this-moment basis rather than being memory-based. . . . participants in process drama will not normally be involved with learning and presenting lines from a *pre-written* dramatic text – a play – but will be 'writing' their own play as the narrative and tensions of their drama unfold in time and space and through action, reaction and interaction. (Bowell & Heap, 2013, Kindle Locations 246-255)

More specifically, I see larp as a twin sister of the "improvised scene" technique, as defined by Dziedzic and Kozłowska in *Drama na lekcjach historii* (1998). All elements they mention are typically found in larps: pre-designed characters, loosely sketched environment, pre-assigned problem(s), and their creative solving through role playing (p. 38-41). Structurally, "improv scenes" and larps are the same phenomenon. As for specific features found in individual scenarios, differences still can be noticed, e.g. larps generally have more rigid structure, more elaborate role descriptions, more specific tasks, formal rules of conduct and game mechanics. But "generally" is the operative word here: larps *tend* to be more firmly structured and rules-heavy than typical edu-drama improves, but it is not always the case, especially if we take freeform/jeepform into account. The same choice of "less/more control" (i.e. "less/more structure")

is faced by the designers of all dramatic improvisations. Hence, I will restate my point: in spite of different statistical *tendencies* in design patterns, edu-larps and "improvised scenes" share the same basic structure.

Of course, I am not unaware of the radically different backgrounds of the two forms, one originating from the highbrow artsy theatre education, the other from the popular entertainment which (initially) had no artistic or didactic ambitions. However, in the case of edu-larp its educational aims come before the entertaining function. As Hyltoft (2010) puts it, edu-larp demands that

organizers of the activity have a plan for acquisition of knowledge or skills or correction of certain behaviours in the target group through the medium of the larp . . . while larps organized among peers may have educational aspects, they cannot be seen as educational larps so long as other factors supersede the educational aspects (p. 44).

This priority shift brings edu-larp closer to applied drama – to the point in which the difference in origins loses all significance. Different evolutionary trees have led to the same product.

Experienced Nordic larpers are probably now wondering why I am taking such pains to prove the obvious. If, for example, Tuovinen (2003, p. 8-10) or Henriksen (2003, p. 111) talk about larp, tabletop rpg, and broadly-understood educational role plays in a single breath, my insistence on "larp = form of applied drama" seems like reinventing the wheel. I have two answers to that:

(1) It is not so obvious in Polish schools where larp is practically unknown, and this paper is informed by my work and its challenges in my home country. If teachers see larp as a form of edu-drama, it will change their perception from 'a novelty with unknown educational merits' to 'a new development among well-known and highly effective teaching methods'.

(2) More importantly, this strong contextualisation is not the end, but a means to pave the way for further argument. There would be little sense in proving larp to be *just as good* as D.I.E.. I claim it is *even better* in certain aspects.

¹ Professional / academic magazine for students of Polish Studies and teachers of Polish.

1.2: Larp is even better

If edu-larp is nearly identical (in its formal features, dynamics of participation, and didactic intent) to improvised educational drama, it is natural to assume (as Szeja did) that they should have the same teaching efficiency and educational outcomes. However, in my opinion, carefully designed larps should easily overcome two systemic obstacles which halted the development of D.I.E. in Polish schooling.

As I have already said, the use of edu-drama in Poland has been thoroughly researched and enthusiastically advocated. One can find drama-focused teacher's guides to all levels, from kindergarten³ to higher education⁴, as well as general studies on the psychological, social, and cognitive aspects of drama. For example, a three-year school experiment (1998-2001) coordinated by prof. Jerzy Trzebiński resulted in stalwart support for D.I.E. As he concludes in final report, students in drama groups outperformed control groups in six areas:

1. Positive emotions and sense of security
2. Cognitive curiosity
3. Cooperativity and friendly attitude towards schoolmates
4. Independence
5. Critical approach to oneself and to school, but combined with positive attitude to school duties
6. After-school activities extending the topics discussed on Polish classes

(Trzebiński 42; translation mine⁵)

Still, there is one fundamental problem: despite huge methodological support, D.I.E. is not being implemented on a larger scale. All research and incentives are totally ignored by the majority of teachers, and I fear nothing is likely to change in this respect. If I may reach for anecdotal evidence: I often ask my students at Kazimierz Wielki University about their high-school experiences with edu-drama, and usually not a single person in class reports they have participated in one. Very few have ever heard of such teaching methods. I can attribute this to two reasons.

1.2.1 Applied theatre demands too much from the teacher

Browsing a guide for prospective drama pedagogues, one can come across passages like that:

... It requires broad knowledge of the topic, extending far beyond historical knowledge [this passage comes from a book addressed to history teachers - MM]. And most of all, great imagination and resourcefulness.

... specific organisational and managerial skills as well as the ability to keep the group under control.

... thorough preparation, specific acting/ dramatic skills, good organisation, pedagogical intuition, openness towards students, and emotional involvement

... The drama teacher spends lots of time and effort on the preparation of educational means.

... should introduce in class photo- and video cameras and computers (Dziedzic & Kozłowska, 1998, p. 63-66; translation mine)

Faced with such a formidable list of expectations, the average school teacher steers away from any involvement in drama pedagogy. And by "average" I mean the great majority, unfortunately.

carefully designed larps should easily overcome two systemic obstacles which halted the development of D.I.E. in Polish schooling

Chronically underpaid and tied up with red tape as it is, the teaching profession in Poland has relatively low social and financial status⁶, with little appeal for energetic and innovative individuals. The popular conviction is that school jobs are taken only by those who are unable to find better employment. Obviously, this unfair exaggeration fails to account for the dedicated educators who are motivated by genuine passion for teaching, and do not get discouraged by the "minor inconvenience" such as low salaries and ever-increasing paperwork. But still, in public schools the passionate ones are severely outnumbered by routinists, and are more likely to be found in non-formal education centers (museums, for instance).

² Króliczka M., 2006, *Drama i happening w edukacji przedszkolnej*.

³ Lewandowska-Kidoń T., 2001, *Drama w kształceniu pedagogicznym*.

⁴ The Polish text of the report is available online at <http://www.assitej.pl/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/RAPORT-Trzebinski.pdf>

1.2.2 Applied theatre does not teach subject-matter knowledge

This problem discourages even those who are willing to introduce edu-innovations in formal teaching: the great potential of drama education advertised by its proponents does not translate well into the learning outcomes prescribed for school subjects. Even though the general trend in education is to shift focus from encyclopedic knowledge to practical skills, this is more pretend rhetoric than fact. Despite huge reforms of the educational system in recent years, subject-matter knowledge still severely outweighs skills in Polish formal learning assessment. Nor is cooperation with non-formal education as strongly encouraged as, for instance, in Finland⁷. On the one hand, teachers would unanimously agree that empathy, creativity, problem solving, teamwork, effective

Metaphorically speaking, where applied drama stumbled and fell, larp may spread wings and fly.

communication, critical thinking or artistic expression are desirable skills. On the other hand, no teacher of History, Geography, Maths, etc. is willing to spend too much lesson time on general personality/soft skills development at the expense of the subject matter, because it is subject-matter knowledge that the students need to pass standardised tests and final exams. By no means specific to Poland, this concern is raised even in countries with a well-established tradition of D.I.E (see e.g. Harder, 2007, p. 234). As Blatner (2007) reports, "arts and drama classes are being squeezed out in order to 'teach to the tests' imposed by national standards programs" on a global scale (Kindle Locations 1871-1872).

Now it is time to restate the main point in my argument. Not only does larp have the same advantages as improvised D.I.E. (see above), but it is also capable of avoiding its both main drawbacks.

1. IT'S EASY TO USE. Compared to the high bar set by edu-drama theorists, **larp seems to be very teacher-friendly**. Of course, I do not mean writing

their own larps, which would be a time-consuming and fairly difficult enterprise. But what if the teacher could download and print ready-made educational scenarios with character sheets and all supporting materials – very much like packaged murder mystery games for dinner parties? Then time and effort spent on the preparation and moderation of classroom activity could be even less than with traditional lessons. This asset could make even the laziest teacher (mildly) interested.

2. IT TEACHES WHAT YOU NEED. Efficient transfer of subject-matter knowledge is more problematic, as even larp educators think "the method is awful for delivering hard knowledge" (Henriksen, 2003, p. 114). However, I believe I have found a way to achieve that in the area of social studies and humanities: **larps based strictly on core content from school textbooks, run as final revision of a large book unit**. If these prove to be educationally efficient, this could be a major incentive for teachers, making edu-larp eligible for implementation on a mass scale in Polish schools. Metaphorically speaking, where applied drama stumbled and fell, larp may spread wings and fly.

Would it be possible to design a 'drama for dummies' without reaching for larps? Perhaps. In her 'mantle of the expert' approach, Dorothy Heathcote switched focus from acting to doing tasks (Bolton, 1997, p. 387), which was a step in this direction. But it did not eliminate insistence on performance, immersion and emotion, or strong endorsement for teacher-in-role (Heathcote, 2010, p. 12). Much as I agree all this is beneficial, I want to target the largest group, including very reluctant individuals (students and teachers alike). If they do not feel like roleplaying, they could still play a larp scenario as a game, with teacher out-of-game as organiser/facilitator. Drama scenarios, by contrast, do not have sufficient game-like goal structure to replace role-play with gameplay. They could – but this is not how drama designers usually work.

⁵ According to September 2012 research conducted by Warsaw-based SWPS (college of social psychology) and educational publisher Operon, only 40% of teachers would call their profession 'prestigious', and only 16% feel it is respected in society. 91% think their work is underestimated by society. Lack of social respect comes first when they point to the disadvantages of their profession. (Operon 2012)

⁶ See Finnish Ministry of Education, *Education and Research 2003-2008 Development Plan*, p. 16.

2. THEORY: HOW EDU-LARP WORKS FOR LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Against the dominant trend in research on edu-larping, I am deliberately putting the "soft" education (creativity, social skills, personality nurturing) aside. As I have said, my project is strictly limited to the potential of larp in teaching the "hard" subject-matter knowledge. I wholeheartedly agree (as suggested by some preliminary research by Paweł Janiszewski, 2012, M.A. student of mine) that larp is inefficient in *delivering new content*, but I strongly believe it to be an excellent way to *review and broaden prior knowledge*. While it is often highlighted that role plays can integrate knowledge and skills from across disciplines, this is another thing I want to steer away from. My intention is to encourage school teachers to use larps in their subject classes, so the "across-disciplines" approach would be counterproductive. As stated above, the best application of larp in schools seems to be the final review of a large unit of subject material, the aim being to integrate, consolidate, expand, and internalize content which has been covered on a number of classes.

the best application of larp in schools seems to be the final review of a large unit of subject material, the aim being to integrate, consolidate, expand, and internalize content which has been covered on a number of classes.

The obvious reason for choosing Social Sciences and Humanities is the inherently social nature of larping. Much as I admire efforts to use larps in teaching math and sciences (e.g. the *Star Seekers* program by Seekers Unlimited, 2012), I do not think it is effective for math or science classes in the long run, because social interactions can be too distracting and time-consuming at the expense of subject matter. In social sciences, just the opposite is true: social play can incorporate coursebook content directly, making it "embedded in the game's functioning mechanics in such a way that the game's success is conditional to understanding its content" (Villalta et al., 2011, p. 2043). It therefore comes as no surprise that role plays are strongly recommended by today's education experts:

"Social science teaching needs to be revitalized towards helping the learner acquire knowledge and skills in an interactive environment. The teaching of social sciences must adopt methods that promote creativity, aesthetics, and critical perspectives, and enable children to draw relationships between past and present, to understand changes taking place in society. Problem solving, dramatization and role play are some hither-to under explored strategies that could be employed."

(National Council of Educational Research and Training [India] viii).

Generally, "a role play is always a simulation" (Crookall, Oxford & Saunders, 1987, p. 155), and a role played event is "a constitution of a social system . . . , which from a constructivist perspective would consist of simulations of selected aspects of mundane reality" (Henriksen, 2010, p. 241). Making players act as people involved in collaborative problem-solving in a specific place in the world - be it a present-day, historical, or fictional one - larps are (effectively) simulations of socio-cultural environments. This is universally acknowledged by edu-larp researchers (Utne, 2005, p. 24; Larsson, 2004, p. 244; Henriksen, 2004, p. 121). Hence, it may be useful to consult general literature on educational simulations, even if it does not address larp specifically. Actually, the node of intersecting theories relevant to edu-larp is far more complicated: it includes (and is not limited to!) drama education, simulation gaming / system modelling, game-based learning, experiential learning, experience design, instructional design, and the constructivist paradigm in educational theory. They all meet on one platform: the design of interactive learning environments.

In other words, edu-larp is simultaneously a (1) game, (2) drama/role play, (3) simulation, and (4) designed learning environment. What does it tell us about its educational potentials? Simulation "is considered to result in improved performance, greater retention, and better understanding of complexity" (Crookall, Oxford & Saunders, 1987, p. 150), and helps "understand the complexities and intricacies of systems that we impact in myriad of ways" (Galarneau, 2005, p. 4). Games "seem useful for learning processual knowledge, such as application, integration and such (Henriksen, 2010, p. 258), making "connections between elements of

knowledge or knowledge and application" (p. 241). It is "the immediacy of games" that "inspires motivation, stimulates active involvement . . . and encourages the development of 'adult' behaviour" (Bowman, 2010, p. 86). Talking specifically about edu-larping, co-founder and former co-principal of Østerskov Efterskole mentions its four main advantages: "distraction from everyday life, motivational strength, heightened activity level of the students and student empowerment" (Hyltoft, 2010, p. 56). Additionally, he reports that larp seems to work especially well with underperforming and/or disadvantaged students (Hyltoft, 2012, p. 22-23). As a psychological side-effect, "Being allowed power over his own decisions within the story makes the student feel that he is taken seriously by the educational system (Hyltoft, 2010, p. 55).

Good as they are to start with, these general assumptions should be followed with more detailed analysis. In all game-based learning environments, educational efficiency is dependent on three major factors: (1) subject-matter must be embedded in gameplay, (2) learners must be willing (or skillfully encouraged) to participate, (3) in-game participation must be supported with out-of-game reflective processes.

1. Subject matter embedded in gameplay

"In constructivism", says Lainema (2009), "the learning of the content must be embedded in the use of that content. . . . *revisiting the same material*, at different times, in rearranged contexts, for different purposes, and from *different conceptual perspectives*, is essential for . . . advanced knowledge acquisition." (p. 58) This is exactly what happens at edu-larps conducted as final revision, in which edu-content is not limited to a single lesson but activates major points of a large subject-matter unit (textbook unit).

I would also like to refer to the Continuum of Knowledge Acquisition Model (Jonassen, McAleese & Duffy, 1993), which divides the acquisition process into three levels – introductory (novice), advanced, and expert. It is suggested that constructivist paradigm does not work well at the introductory stage. Hence, with my positioning of edu-larp at the end of a book unit, introductory learning is covered by regular teacher-controlled lessons. Larp as the final revision marks the step

into the advanced level, where constructivist learning should work best.

For instance, the nation's history of a given century was discussed on six meetings, covering: 1) wars and international politics; 2) internal social and political issues; 3) intellectual, philosophical, and religious movements; 4) economy and technology; 5) microhistory: the everyday life; 6) culture and arts. All this constitutes a complete thematic unit in the student's history book. A concluding larp, set near the end of the period to enable players to relate to all significant events, can do much more than just revise the content of six lessons. In line with *A Practical Guide to Teaching History in the Secondary School*, I see "Role play as consolidator of knowledge" (Guscott, 2007, p. 40-41).

Obviously, some of this assumed "prior knowledge" will already be forgotten (or worse: never actually learned) by individual students; it would be naive to think they have mastered the entire book unit. To make up for this, right before the game students should be given printed handouts summarising all major things they need to know (in this case, the "need to know" applies to larp characters and school learners

Very much like in the MIT's multiplayer classroom game *Revolution*

simultaneously). Then they face a full-fledged (ca. 80 minutes) larp on two consecutive lesson units (in Poland lesson periods last 45 minutes). Fragmented and disconnected before, now the knowledge becomes integrated in a cohesive multifaceted simulation in the style of Process Drama: "in ways that make the subject matter more relevant, alive, and unforgettable" (Weltsek-Medina, 2007, Kindle Locations 2032-2033). Entering the interactive environment in which all aspects of the simulated reality are intertwined, students can activate all relevant knowledge they have, and expand it with information from the handouts.

The design of in-game factions and conflicts exposes links between the big politics, social groups, and individual (public and private) interests, putting students against the big picture of

⁷ A comprehensive description of *Revolution* and other projects created under the MIT-Microsoft *Games-To-Teach* programme are available at <http://www.educationarcade.org/gtt/>.

the period / culture / society with all bits and pieces moving into positions. Very much like in the MIT's multiplayer classroom game *Revolution*², "A central assumption underlying the game is the interplay between personal and local concerns (making a living, marrying off your children, preparing for a party) and the kinds of national and very public concerns" (Squire & Jenkins, 2003, p. 17). This is a model of a historical reality, and "Models, like myths and metaphors, help us to make sense of our world (Ryder, 2012). As Balzer (2011) says, "learning on a model offers such didactical potential because the participants are being integrated into the physical, factual, scenic arrangement as agents; they are allowed to actively take part in the simulation's creation" (p. 35). And if the game is set in:

- a real-world country from your Civics, Political Science or Foreign Culture classes
- a real-world historical period from your History classes
- the setting of a novel / drama from your Literature classes

then entering this game activates your entire knowledge of the given world, essentially making the subject matter part of gameplay.

When we consider Heckner's critique of video games in history education, we can truly appreciate the didactic potentials of larp:

"When I taught a history class on the origins of Nazism, I frequently found that those – often very smart and articulate – students whose interests were informed by the materiality-obsessed heroic narratives of video gaming and The History Channel had trouble mustering up enthusiasm for learning about the cultural and social environment from which the crimes of Nazism originated. . . . it would seem that 'authentic' World War II games in their current state are not only not teaching us anything helpful, but they distract from what is really to learn from these events in Germany . . ." (Heckner, 2012, p. 191-192)

It seems that the social and cultural dimensions of larp make it a far better tool for teaching these

aspects of history than computer games. As Heyward (2010) says, "emotions associated with the social interactions that occur in learning activities are fundamental in securing the long-term retention of the actual concepts being studied (p. 198). I guess the best approach to game-based learning is to mix role-played activities with video- and card/board-gaming, maximising the potentials of all platforms.

In my edu-larps, all in-game goals and gameplay actions are rooted in the personal and social dimensions of a real-world culture as depicted in the coursebook. This is how we achieve "embedding the content to be learned into the core mechanics of the game itself, thereby ensuring that the mere participation in the game provides the participant with exposure to the content" (Henriksen, 2010, p. 258). The adopted character comes with a more or less specified worldview and all kinds of backgrounds: race, gender, family, education, profession, religion etc. Unless the character suffers from amnesia or other mental disorders, one needs to position the character and his/her in-game situation within the broad cultural (social, political, economic, technological etc.) context of the game world. Even if the role card does not specify these, they are always implied as indispensable parts of human experience, so players should have at least some vague ideas of how an individual would relate to the environment represented in the game.

The personal perspective, or the clash of two personal perspectives (the character-role and the person-player), is a powerful vehicle to be used by educators. As Hyltoft (2010) says, edu-larp can put a student:

in a narrative situation, where the character of the student has an internal motivation for acquiring a skill, which the student himself could never be persuaded to have. So if the edu-larp manages to engage the student . . . , new priorities and goals can be transferred from the character to that student . . . It can be very hard to explain to a whole class of students with different

⁸ Whenever I talk about the dichotomy of intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation, I cannot shake off the doubt planted in me by Steven Reiss (2000), who claims that the concept was invented by idealistic researchers and backed up with questionable experiments. Reiss says: "our educational system cannot deal with the idea that there is someone who cannot enjoy learning and never will. Educators are making a mistake when they think all children were born with more or less equal potential to enjoy learning" (as quoted in Grabmeier, 2000). Delving into the depths of the psychological debate is beyond my field of expertise (and the scope of this paper), so I will drop this thread here – still, it is worth a closer look.

interests and agendas, why some piece of abstract learning is relevant to them. It is much easier to create a character to whom it is relevant. As an example, most 15 year olds have no use for nuclear theory, but secret agents in the later part of World War 2 will memorize it gleefully. (p. 49)

Thus, student's mind is processing the knowledge of the game world in continuous interaction with its issues and challenges in which he or she gets involved at cognitive, affective and behavioural level (see e.g. Kot, 2012, p. 122). All levels contribute to the illusion of personal involvement in the simulated situation, merging the real mental / emotional / physical experience with the fictional diegesis built on syllabus-based knowledge.

I must admit the design of such larps is a heavy task. Not only do we have to design proper social dynamics and story arcs, but also make sure we have implemented all major learning objectives prescribed for this book unit. More of that in the Design section. But this is the job of the larpwright, not the teacher's. The teacher needs to see the burden taken off her back.

2. Onboarding, or participatorial incentives

On the one hand, even with perfectly embedded content, an edu-game will be useless if learners do not play it. As Whitton (2010) observes, especially adult learners "may perceive games in the context of learning as frivolous or a waste of time" (p. 37). On the other hand, in classroom context learners can be simply ordered to play. On the... third?... hand, mandatory participation may lead to unplayful gaming (Makedon, 1984, p. 49), ruining all educational effects which were reliant on *playfulness*.

As with all prolonged user experiences, designers need to provide participants with incentives first to *willingly* enter the experience ("The Onboarding Challenge", as termed by Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011, p. 62-63), and then to stay active until the experience is over. With reference to Schein (1962), Henriksen (2010) says "the initial unwillingness to learn" is frequent in *any* learning context, based on the learner's assumption that his/her existing knowledge and behaviour patterns are sufficient, so there is no need to learn anything new (p. 235). (This is clearly the case with

teaching history, as most students do not find historical knowledge useful beyond school.) The very fact that learners are offered a *game to play* is not enough; "it is an oversimplification to assume that any game is motivational simply because it is a game (Whitton, 2010, p. 39). "Putting on costumes and acting out decisions with big consequences gives life to what could have been a boring history lesson", says Linder, Swedish full-time larp educator (as cited in Jansen, 2012, p. 32), but even her group sometimes "has participants who more or less refuse to play, deliberately stay off character or otherwise ruins the game" (Jansen, 2012, p. 33).

The natural solution to the engagement problem seems to be "make the game entertaining!" However, not all edu-theorists support this claim. This is how Kapp (2012) concludes Sitzmann's (2011) metaanalysis of instructional efficiency of computer games:

This seems to be of extreme importance in edu-larps simulating a foreign culture or historical period

"Simulation games don't have to be entertaining to be educational. The research indicated that trainees learned the same amount of information in simulation games whether the games were ranked high in entertainment value or low in entertainment value. There does not appear to be a correlation between the entertainment value of a simulation game and its educational merit." (Kapp, 2012, Kindle Locations 2439-2441)

Whitton (2010) says "I believe fun can be a component of an engaging experience, but not an essential one" (p. 44). Also Henriksen (2010) consistently downplays the value of entertainment in non-digital edu-role plays: "process is not motivated by entertaining the participant, but rather by utilising a goal-orientated incentive towards mastering the situation, rather than feeling insufficient to it. Such motivation combines intrinsic and extrinsic participational incentives" (p. 249). I must say I am not convinced by this rhetoric. Much as I agree with Henriksen and Kapp on other things, I take an issue with this one.

⁹ Described by Łukasz Wrona and myself in "DEMOCRACY Project: Larp in Civic Education", to be published in the proceedings of 2nd Larp Conference (Wrocław, Poland, 11-13.01.2013)

First of all, their views might inspire teachers to see non-entertainment as a valuable feature of edu-games, which I would find regrettable. As Hyltoft (2010) says: "Whilst it is not a prerequisite for an edu-larp that it is perceived as fun by the participants . . . , there are no significant signs in the games mentioned that entertainment value is inhibiting the learning gains of the students" (p. 44). Anyway, I would argue that Henriksen's 'goal-orientated incentive' is just another kind of entertainment. "The role play . . . does help us creating bubbles of intrinsic motivation by being able to actualise its problems to the participant, admits Henriksen (2010, p. 249). The motivational factors he suggests *in place of* entertainment are "fruitful frustration, irritation, narrative desire, social roles and frames, etc." (p. 232) , and most notably, "Papert's (1998) concept of hard fun, utilising fruitful frustration as a driving incentive" (233). Essentially, this boils down to the not-so-new idea of intrinsic motivation based on a sense of purpose, autonomy, and mastery, recently elaborated on in the very popular book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* by Dan Pink (2009)³ (and in the context of edu-drama, 'fruitful frustration' is reminiscent of 'productive tension' recommended by Dorothy Heathcote [2010]). I could subscribe to all points made by Henriksen, but I will not put them in *opposition* to entertainment. If the human drive for hard fun and mastery is rewarded with satisfaction (i.e. pleasure) – it *is* entertaining. In Lazzaro's (2004) four keys to emotions in game, Hard Fun is put on equal terms with entertainments such as Easy Fun, Altered States, and The People Factor. Therefore, what Henriksen (2010) sees as "entertaining" vs. "non-entertaining", I would change to "immediately entertaining (easy fun)" vs. "first frustrating, then entertaining (hard fun)".

How to achieve that in the game? Crookall, Oxford & Saunders (1987) claim: "The major problem faced by participants, especially initially, is to reduce uncertainty, so that they can select appropriate strategies and behave accordingly in the particular situation (p. 167). This seems to be of extreme importance in edu-larps simulating a foreign culture or historical period which the learners are only vaguely familiar with. Printed and spoken

introductions are helpful, as "The imaginative power of the dramatic pre-text is that it can provide infinite imagined roles and places for exploration, even within the physical context of a classroom (Cameron, Carroll & Wotzko, 2011, p. 4). But if players have little experience with drama activities, it may not work at all. It is not enough to provide them with character & setting descriptions, and push into play with an unspecific goal of "immerse in this role and interact with others". I strongly believe inexperienced larpers must be given explicit, actionable tasks ('goal-orientated incentives', see Henriksen above), otherwise they are likely to feel lost in the game.

In my high-school research project I assign at least three specific tasks to each character. Some are based on collection ("collect 1000 gold pieces"), some on interpersonal relations ("protect your cousin from harm" / "your enemy is illegally building an army – do not let him get away with it"), some are factional ("talk people into an alliance with France"), etc. In the DEMOcracy Project, a civic education programme with larps reenacting 17th century parliamentary traditions in junior high schools⁴, I went one step further. Not only did I prescribe clear descriptive "do this / don't let them do that" tasks, but also assigned numerical values. For example, "3 pts. if you get elected for parliament, and +1 if they won't tie your hands with binding instructions; 1 pt if that bastard Woodmaster, your irritating neighbour, **is not elected**; 1 pt for each elected MP who will call for punishment for Zebrzydowski", etc. This worked successfully both as a strong incentive for competitive-cooperative gameplay and as guidelines reducing the players' uncertainty mentioned by Crookall et al. (1987).

Finally, in problem-based social simulations motivation for participation and emotional involvement tends to emerge organically. With players engaged in negotiations between three competing factions, the larps meet all requirements set by Szewkis et al. (2011) for successful classroom collaboration: *common goal, positive interdependence between peers, coordination and communication between peers, individual accountability, awareness of peers work, and joint rewards* (p. 3-4). This is how **cooperation** within each faction is likely to work –

¹⁰ See my text "Less Larp in Edu-Larp Design" in the 2013 Knutepunkt book.

Mark Schick (2008) says players are most likely to "break frame" due "to the emotionally charged nature of the topic" (p.2), but I had no reports of such cases. Distant history does not seem to have strong emotional resonance with youngsters.

and result in motivational **synergy** when combined with the effect of **competition** between factions:

The actual intergroup rivalry comes from participants importing into the simulation all those taken-for-granted behavioural dispositions, attitudinal orientations, and the like which would lead to intergroup rivalry in *any* circumstance, whether or not it is termed a simulation. . . . it is hardly a simulation, but the real thing – except that participants have made certain pre-simulation agreements, which bound the simulation activity of rivalry and mark it off as somehow relevant only to the purposes of the simulation . . . (Crookall, Oxford & Saunders, 1987, p. 165)

Villalta et al. (2011) insist that “Collaboration must be embedded in the game’s functioning mechanics, so that its success is conditional to having worked collaboratively” (p. 2045). One consequence of this: unmotivated students who would like to sit by without entering gameplay will not be left alone. If the in-game conflicted parties need to recruit supporters, then uninvolved players will be actively encouraged by peers to join in. “The desire to being able to master a situation is not limited to a cognitive desire for situational adaptation [von Glaserfeld, 1995], but is also likely to be fuelled by social incentives” (Henriksen, 2010, s. 249), so even if initial motivators fail, peer pressure may do the job.

3. Reflective processes

Larpers and educators are increasingly aware of the importance of non-game reflective activities linked to the play experience. Addressing Sitzmann’s metaanalysis on computer games, Kapp (2012) states clearly that “Simulation games embedded in a program of instruction are better tools for learning than stand-alone simulation games (Kindle Locations 2449-2453). In the context of larp, emphasis on debriefings is now commonplace in the Knutepunkt book papers, and yet more support comes from Schein’s unfreeze-move-refreeze model (1962) as discussed by Henriksen (2010), who recommends caution “in order to ensure a proper completion of the process. A binding part for the three stages is the need for reflective process” (p. 235). Karalevich (2012) puts it simply: “a game won’t have a lot of educational effects if the organizers don’t facilitate a discussion,

a debriefing and a detailed reflection of the game after it has ended” (p. 42).

But “after the game has ended” is not the only time to position reflection. Henriksen (2010) says reflectional processes in edu-games can be placed in four ways: pre-reflection (briefing and preparatory activities), post-reflection (debriefing and further discussion/reflections), break-away reflection (when the game stops for a moment), and reflection-in-action, which means to “embed reflective process into the task at hand, allowing an ongoing adaptation and development to a context or a problem” (p. 251).

(1) Edu-larps in my research project are **backed with extensive pre-reflection**, as they are the final revision of a large coursebook unit: the content has been discussed for several hours in total, and the larp itself is explicitly framed as a revision activity which precedes tests.

(2) **Post-reflection is at a disadvantage**: with very little time for post-larp debriefing, the responsibility for further reflective processes falls on the teacher. Some will make use of the opportunity, some will not (to see how huge difference it makes, see the two cases discussed by Aarebrot and Nielsen, 2012, p. 28). There is no way we can guarantee that, but we can greatly increase the chances if we provide teachers with ready-made lesson plans to be used after the larp. A successful example of this approach is the package of teacher’s materials prepared by the Educational Simulations company for *Real Lives* computer game (see Downloads at [educacionalsimulations.com](http://educationalsimulations.com)). I have not tried that in my projects yet, but this is definitely the direction I want to go¹⁰.

(3) **Reflection-in-action**, or “embedding reflective phases into the game mechanics [e.g.] by using shared perspectives and goals, allowing group-based participation, thereby opening room for discussion and shared reflection within the game” (Henriksen, 2010, p. 151) is **omnipresent**: the core gameplay is all about group-based analysing, debating, plotting and negotiating focused on edu-content issues.

(4) **Break-away reflection is not planned, but can emerge** when need arises. The need can be teacher- or learner-determined. By learner, when s/he breaks out of character to ask the teacher or GM

about historical details or game rules and boundaries⁶ (Example: a player in-character convinced a soldier to murder her rival, and out-of-character came for instructions on how to arrange it.). By teacher, when the teacher / GM intervenes in order to correct a potentially harmful distortion of factual knowledge or misinterpretation of game rules by the players. (Example: once players impersonating the queen and her advisors were planning to put a traitor to an ad hoc trial and send to prison. I felt the need to step in and explain that the legal system leaves no power to the queen (or even the king) to make this happen without due process of law.)

3. DESIGN: A MODEL OF EDU-LARP FOR CONTENT REVISION

The model I devised for the research project is a negotiation game between three political factions, conflicted by partially incompatible goals but to some extent dependent on each other. Negotiation is essential for two reasons: first, it creates space for in-game reflective thinking (see above: reflection-in-action); second, it makes players constantly process the desired edu-content in their minds (see above: subject-matter embedded in gameplay). As Echeverria et. al (2011) claim, learning objectives can be met when "By directly mapping these objectives onto the mechanics, the student is forced to fulfill them in order to successfully complete the game." (p. 1129) If we assume that negotiation and persuasion are core mechanics (= actions players take to influence other agents and events in the game world) of my larps, then the "direct mapping" of curricular content is obvious. All major issues they negotiate/argue about belong to subject-matter knowledge, as in-game problems, characters, and social groups have been implemented from the history textbook.

According to "the elemental tetrad" by Jesse Schell (2008), each game comprises mechanics, story, aesthetics, and technology (p. 41-42).

Technology was limited to pen-and-paper: printed handouts and nametags, handwritten notes (if players wanted to write contracts or letters), and huge wall maps of the historical period.

Aesthetics, understood by Schell as "how your game looks, sounds, smells, tastes, and feels" (p. 42), was deliberately neglected. There is no doubt

that props, costumes, room décor, music theme etc. would enhance the experience, but were 'sacrificed' for the sake of the print-and-play principle of minimum effort. Moreover, "since the goal of the drama in education is to think and learn, highly polished or rehearsed elements, the right costume, and so forth are only distractions" (Weltsek-Medina, 2007, Kindle Locations 2064-2065). The only aesthetic element to spice up everyday classroom setting was acting performance and in-role dialogue. However, framework devised for educational games at Carnegie Mellon University has a different view of aesthetics: "the subjective experience of the player", which includes "sensation, fantasy, narrative, challenge, fellowship, discovery, expression, and submission" (Aleven, Myers, Easterday & Ogan, 2010, p. 71). This will be discussed below beside Malone and Lepper (1987).

Mechanics did not include rule-based tests or numerical statistics. In fact, gameplay featured no actions beyond immediate human-human interaction, in line with Villalta's et al. (2011) claim: "The user's interaction with the game must be simple and intuitive and not add unnecessary complexity" (p. 2042). Story was set in a formal meeting between factions, focused on problem-solving through negotiation, persuasion, bribery, blackmail, intrigue, and information management. Physical violence in this context was highly unlikely, as goals of all factions could only be achieved in a non-violent manner. Thus, no combat mechanics was needed. In case of player-induced violence, the larpmaster would resolve it arbitrarily. In other words, the 'mechanics' of player action consisted in speech, acting performance, writing/signing documents, and resource management (money/information).

Story was composed of four elements: historical background known from prior history classes and summarised on printed handouts; pre-defined personal stories and conflicts on individual role sheets; emergent narrative created by players; and a basic frame dividing the game into three scenes or phases:

- a) Preparations of all factions separately, in which they discuss strategy for the upcoming meeting and learn about the goals and personalities of their group members.
- b) Unofficial meeting of all factions, where everyone is struggling to further their agendas

before the official decisions are taken. This is always the central part of gameplay, where all factions mix, break down into pairs and small groups, get involved in scheming, arguing, bribing, signing contracts, recruiting support etc.

c) Official negotiations at a table, usually moderated by the host (host in the game world, e.g. the queen if the larp is set in the royal chambers), and preferably leading to voting, agreement, or another kind of conflict resolution.

On average, phase a) lasts 15-20 minutes, b) 45-50 minutes, c) about 20 minutes, but the exact moment of switching phases is at larpmaster's discretion. This is "a flexible structure that enables the teacher, who is the game moderator and guides the flow of actions, to adjust the game to the actual participation of the students in the classroom" (Villalta et al., 2011, p. 2044).

In the detailed design of story and characters, I used the framework of Larp Experience Design (Konzack 2007), which I find simple and precise enough to be used by school teachers who would like to become larpwrights. In the "tactical group frame", I focused on *social narratives* arising from tensions between the rich and the poor; more privileged and less privileged; traditionalists and progressivists; and I designed each of three factions as an *interpretation community* unified by a political *motivation principle* (17th-c. scenario: royalists vs. French faction vs. Austrian faction; 18th-c. scenario: royalists vs. patriotic faction vs. hetmans faction). Still, I made sure factions were not monolithic, as "within the group identities . . . there lies enormous scope for individual differences, levels of participation and opinions" (Bowell & Heap, 2013, Kindle Location 843). As an equivalent of Konzack's *secret communities with hidden agendas*, I created several roles of "moles" working secretly for an opposite faction. In the "operational character frame", I equipped each character with *ways to influence the larp*; *motivations*; and *psychology*, and some of them with *moral dilemmas* and *secrets*. The "strategic world frame", including *cosmology* and *worldview(s)*; *philosophies*, *religions*, *ideologies*, as well as *cultures* and *subcultures*, was taken directly from the history textbook, and integrated in the design of both factions and characters.

Activation of and reflection on this curricular content was the primary educational objective. Aleven, Myers, Easterday & Ogan (2010) put forward three questions to be answered here:

1. **(Prior knowledge)** What knowledge or skills do student/players need to have before starting the game?

2. **(Learning and retention)** What knowledge or skills can student/players reasonably be expected to learn from the game?

3. **(Potential transfer)** What knowledge and skills might they learn that go beyond what they actually encountered in the game? (p. 70)

In this project, required prior knowledge encompassed the entire book unit (history of Poland in 17th or 18th century). Students were given handouts summarising major events and persons they should know of. Expected learning/retention included expansion, integration and consolidation of prior knowledge, plus a deeper understanding of the social and political realities of the period. Potentially transferable knowledge and skills concerned politics, small group dynamics, and soft skills such as negotiation, teamwork, and effective communication (though I don't think a single game is enough to produce an observable increase – this should be a repeated experience).

Echeverria et al. (2011) propose a set of guidelines for classroom games, based on revised Bloom's taxonomy, which distinguishes four types of knowledge: factual, conceptual, procedural, and meta-cognitive. Focusing on the needs of test-based formal high-school education, I am primarily interested in the first two:

Factual: an explicit fact must appear as content in the game . . .

Conceptual: a specific concept must emerge explicitly from interaction with the game, through its mechanics. (p. 1129)

In my larps, explicit facts appeared both on character sheets and historical timeline handouts. Game mechanics was limited to general rules of collaboration in upholding the game fiction: in-/out-of-character communication, limitations on physical contact, task orientation, and gamemaster's authority. Since human interactions (mostly conversation) can be considered mechanics-based, the curricular concepts (political factions, ideological/personal conflicts, geopolitical situation, etc.) did emerge through mechanics.

Additionally, all six Bloom's cognitive processes seem to take place in edu-larps. This is how Echeverría et al. (2011) translate these into game design:

- ➔ **Remember:** repetitive tasks with auxiliary rewards, keeping the student constantly confronted with the knowledge that must be remembered, keeping him/her engaged with the rewards.
- ➔ **Understand:** free exploration of interactions between objects that provide clear feedback, allowing the student to observe how a given process or concept works.
- ➔ **Apply:** direct action over objects with a specific goal, allowing the student to directly apply the specific knowledge.
- ➔ **Analyze:** problem-solving tasks and puzzles that involve integrating and selecting different elements.
- ➔ **Evaluate:** activities that allow the player to modify and correct existing objects, processes or simulations, check how something works and modify it if necessary to improve it.
- ➔ **Create:** activities that enable the player to build new artifacts, design new processes and test them experimentally. (p. 1129)

Written with reference to video games, phrases like 'action over objects' or 'modify objects' may be unclear in the context of larp. As defined by Schell (2008), objects are "Characters, props, tokens, scoreboards, anything that can be seen or manipulated in your game" (p. 136). Physical objects found in the classroom and used in-game as their diegetic equivalents constitute one category: desks, chairs, stationery etc. (The presence of mobile phones, blackboard, video projector, school rucksacks etc. was ignored.) But their meaning in the game frame is negligible; hardly ever could they be used to make a significant difference in the game. The central 'elements' that contain the 'game state', being agents as well as objects of actions, are player characters. Plus, the 17th-century game has virtual money as a resource, which can be transferred by means of written notes. Given that, my edu-larps can be positioned within Bloom/Echeverría's framework as follows:

Remember: larp does not have 'repetitive tasks' in the sense of math or grammar drills; however, the condition of 'constantly confronted with the knowledge' is met by the ongoing discussion of

major content-based problems (social, political, economic, military issues of the period) to which all characters are related through in-game tasks.

Understand: players watch social and interpersonal interactions (attempts at persuasion, intimidation, etc.), including curricular knowledge of historical events, social groups, and conflicts used to gain advantage or put someone at disadvantage in the emerging narrative; their immediate or delayed results (successes and failures) constitute clear feedback.

Apply: players initiate above-mentioned actions themselves (and get feedback).

Analyse: individually and collectively, players reflect on the situation and devise action plans (especially in the first phase of the game, when factions start in separate locations to make plans).

Evaluate: as long as the other player is in the game, unsuccessful attempts at persuasion/negotiation can be modified and repeated; experience generalised from several interactions can inform further action.

Create: the simple technology of pen-and-paper makes it possible to create artifacts not envisioned by the larpwright, e.g. false documents compromising a political opponent as a traitor. It was not suggested in game materials or introduction, but it nevertheless happened in two of my high-school games.

character design should give players the illusion of influence on national / regional issues, but no more than illusion

Finally, I would like to address the "sensation, fantasy, narrative, challenge, fellowship, discovery, expression, and submission" (p. 71) counted by Alevén, Myers, Easterday & Ogan (2010) as aesthetics. I am more inclined to see them as motivations. A well-known taxonomy of player/student motivations comes from Malone and Lepper (1987), who identify four individual (challenge, curiosity, control, fantasy), and three interpersonal (cooperation, competition, recognition) motivations (p. 248-249), all of which larps can facilitate. My personal favourite of the competing typologies is Nick Yee's (2007) **advancement**, mechanics, **competition** (grouped under Achievement); **socialising**, relationship, **teamwork** (Social); **discovery**, **role-playing**,

customisation, and *escapism* (Immersion) (p. 5); names in **bold** here indicate motivations I find strongly present in larps, in *italics* optional presence.

Bedwell et al. (2012) uses some of these terms not to describe the experiential player's perspective but game components or 'attributes': action language, assessment, **conflict/challenge**, **control**, environment, **game fiction**, **human interaction**, *immersion*, and rules/**goals** (p. 9). Of these, action language doesn't apply, environment ("representation of the physical surroundings", p. 13) is of little importance, and assessment is limited to non-quantifiable ongoing interpersonal feedback plus debriefing. Larp operates primarily via 1) **human interaction** centered on 2) **goals** and 3) **conflict/challenge** within the frame of 4) largely **controllable** 5) **game fiction**, with the powerful but non-obligatory addition of 6) *immersion*.

4. TROUBLESHOOTING: ELIMINATION OF RISK FACTORS

I have also paid attention to the potential dangers or shortcomings of educational larping and historical games, pointed out by various researchers (referenced below). If we are aware of the risk factors, we can eliminate most of them at the stage of scenario design.

Problem 1: Varied exposure to educational content

Solution: Guided whole-group discussion in the last phase

Henriksen (2004) notices that in larp "the trajectories become physically separated, thereby limiting the participant's choice of situations. He can no longer take part in all the enacted situations of the game" (p. 123), therefore might not be exposed to significant parts of educational content (p. 120-123). To minimize the risk, the game was divided into three phases, the last one being:

c) official negotiations at a table, usually moderated by the host (host in the game world, e.g. the queen if the larp is set in the royal chambers), and preferably leading to voting, agreement, or another kind of conflict resolution.

In this arrangement, the last phase will bring forward all major issues that larp designers want students to discuss, and make sure everyone is able to hear.

Problem 2: Counter-historical effects of gameplay memory

Solution: Illusion of influence, debriefing

Concerns about the potential "counter-historical effects" (Campbell, 2008, p. 197) of historical simulations are not to be ignored. Not only can history be misrepresented in the game itself, but also distorted by player-generated actions. On the other hand, we do not need (and do not want) to design games so strictly bound by historical detail that they would not allow for any change in the game world. As Jeremiah McCall (2011) says,

a simulation cannot actually be a dynamic working model of the past and at the same time reproduce every historical event and detail in ways that match historical conventions. . . . a black box that returns an exact match to historical events each time is not a working model; it is a static representation of what happened. (p. 26-27)

Game with no possibility for human input could hardly be a game at all.

A way to balance historical fidelity and the room for creative input is putting the player in the shoes of nonentities, as is frequently done in computer historical simulations: "in *Medal of Honor*, for example, the player's role was made generic so that his or her actions, while having local effects, did not globally affect the outcome of history" (Fullerton, 2008, p. 234). But this will not work in my projects. In high school history classes, larps are supposed to be processing political, legal, religious, social, domestic and economic issues - not battlefield tactics - so they have to be able to influence these spheres on a national level. Or, to be more specific, they have to *feel* they can do it, which does not have to be true.

My solution to this: character design should give players the illusion of influence on national / regional issues, but no more than illusion. In the terms of *Patterns in Game Design* by Björk and Holopainen (2004), it would be called *Perceived Chance to Succeed*: "players must feel that they can influence the outcome of the game . . . do not actually have to have a chance to succeed . . . the important part is that they believe that they have" (p. 203). As lobbyists, government advisors, respected aristocrats, members of parliaments, military officials, renowned scholars, opposition leaders etc., they should be situated close to seats of power, but never as real decision-makers. Their

meetings behind the scenes may strive to change the course of history (e.g. incite a rebellion or influence the outcome of a forthcoming international summit), but only through pressure on kings, parliaments or ministers who are unavailable in gameplay.

For example, if our game is about the outcome of World War II, the scenario could simulate a (fictional) meeting of military and intelligence officers, diplomats, businessmen, and other interested parties from various countries right before the Yalta Conference, its aim being to put forward and discuss all major issues that have to be decided. Player characters are sent here to gather intelligence, promote their interests, try to form or reinforce alliances - and report everything back to their superiors. The players have the freedom to use their own judgments and to come up with their own solutions, but the point is that none of them is in a position to make binding decisions in the name of "their" governments. Even if their meeting brings completely a-historical conclusions, this should not distort their knowledge of Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin in Yalta - because the teacher makes it clear that the roleplayed meeting never really happened, and the Yalta Conference was a different event that took place "later".

To maximise the educational effect, the teacher should summarise the Yaltan event in an immediate post-larp debriefing. For one thing, it gives players a sense of completion; after all, the entire game was about "how to influence the Yalta decisions". More importantly, this can make the learner develop an emotional relationship with the historical event, as the character perspective and the emotions roused in competitive gameplay take some time to wear off. I think (yes, this is an unverified hypothesis) that if the players are still feeling the impact of the game experience, they will - at this moment - really care about the outcome of the Yalta summit, and attach emotional value ("We won! / We lost!") to it. To facilitate that, I would recommend using the "Character futures" debriefing trick (Andresen, 2012, p. 110): players are asked to describe where their characters are, what they do, and how they would feel some time in the future.

Problem 3: Confusion of fictional and factual characters

Solution: Name-coding

Stacy Roth, a living history first person interpreter, divides characters into factual, "who once actually existed" (57), and fictional, or "fictional composite, a representative based on selected biographical, cultural, occupational, and other characteristics", which "can be desirable - and more flexible - if the goal is to highlight typical occupations or subcultures rather than specific people" (57-58). She also mentions the semifictional type: "real people for whom documentation is scanty" (58). I do not think any school larper could ever come close to the "factual" standard set by living history interpreters, so even if I use well-known and documented figures such as monarchs or war leaders, I will modestly call them "semifictional . . . for whom documentation is scanty", for scanty is the player's knowledge of these documents.

Given that, some of my historical larps include only fictional characters, some use both fictional and semifictional ones. I have not yet gathered enough data to tell whether one of these approaches is better from the educational or experiential perspective (logistics-wise, semifictional ones are more problematic, as they have specified gender - we may end up with 10 male characters in a class with only 3 male students). Still, I want to avoid potential confusion of the once-living with never-existing persons in the players' memory. Therefore, I established a clear rule for character names: if a specific name is given on the role card, this role is based on a real (factual) biography - and if the character is non-historical, the player enters larp under his/her real name (slightly altered to add a foreign flavour, when needed).

Problem 4: Shyness or unwillingness to act

Solution: Attitudinal roles, task orientation

Another problem sometimes encountered in classroom role plays is the learners' unwillingness to get involved in role playing. Already mentioned in 2. Onboarding, or participational incentives, it is by no means limited to the opening of the game. There may be students who are willing to participate in problem-solving - but not in the artistic/emotional performance of the character's personality. Especially older children (teenagers) may find role plays "too simple and childish" (Tuovinen, 2003, p. 12), as "the process of

becoming another character is harder for grown-ups" (Linder, as cited in Jansen, 2012, p. 34). American context is no different; see Bowman (2010, p. 102). In the UK, Whitton (2010) mentions the diverse attitude of college students to game-based learning, including "a feeling that games are *frivolous* and inappropriate for education" (p. 40). In Poland, Siek-Piskozub (1995), professor in applied linguistics and an avid proponent of *ludic strategy* (her term) in language teaching, writes that not just role plays but virtually all fun activities may have this problem with teenage and adult learners (p. 51, 55). To that I do not have a perfect solution. Nevertheless, I think that my model of edu-larping – with intentional castration of its artistic side to emphasise content-based task completion – will at least decrease the risks.

"The effectiveness of role play withing a simulation depends on the degree of congruence between the individual and the role s/he is asked to play. For example, a reluctant teenage boy asked to play the role of a grandmother might find this relatively difficult and unappealing" (Crookall, Oxford & Saunders, 1987, p. 159). Edu-larp designer therefore should remember that putting less emphasis on acting and character immersion reduces the risk of severe incongruence between the role and the individual. This is not to say teachers should actively *discourage* students from deeper immersion/performance; what I am saying is that shy students should feel free to "choose a greater role distance . . . by the assumption of an attitudinal role", as defined by Carrol and Cameron (2005), which "requires only the agreement of the player to take on an attitude of a character in the drama for it to operate" (p. 11). That is what Dorothy Heathcote did in her 'mantle of the expert' approach to drama, when she was struggling with uncooperative youngsters: "conscious that she must get these lads *doing* something, in fact *anything but acting*, she let the *tasks* dictate the meaning of the experience." (Bolton, 1997, p. 387) This idea has become central to my design approach: with role play and immersion optional, task-orientation should be the core.

Serious students who need some time to get in character may have difficulties in short and funny ("babyish") role plays, but a 90-minute socio-cultural simulation gives them proper room for involvement. Moreover, self-conscious students

As long as educational content is properly embedded in core gameplay, game-based logic does not seem to be an impediment to learning.

who feel bad at acting and are ashamed of emotion displays are at odds with all kinds of drama activities. Fortunately for them, if the larp is focused on the achievement of personal and collective tasks through political negotiations, the very nature of the environment reduces the importance of emotional and artistic expression. It is possible to participate - and do well in the game! - without heavy gesturing, raising your voice or changing speech patterns. The fact that other edu-drama projects take the same approach gives me reassurance that this is the right course. E.g. the team behind the Finnish scientific edu-larp *Rescue Mission 20X0* realised that "this might sound terrible: we are having a role playing game and we're just chopping off the role playing aspect" (Meriläinen, 2011, 7:58). The same concern had been raised years before about Heathcote's drama: "Mantle of the Expert's reliance on *actual* behaviours seems, in this respect, to disqualify it as dramatic" (Bolton, 1997, p. 409). Surprising as it may seem, the reduction of the role-play element is rational from the educational point of view.

Problem 5: Performance anxiety

Solution: Explicit tasks

Sometimes linked to lack of confidence in role playing, sometimes not, stress created by performing before an audience or by being put to a skill test is a significant risk factor. Participants may "be cramped by the fear of making such an error, which may actually increase the chances of an error being made" (Crookall, Oxford & Saunders, 1987, p. 152). This is the most frequent problem I have encountered in the final "official negotiations" phase of my larps. Phase a) "strategy-building in separate factions" has almost always been successful; phase b) "unofficial negotiation" has not failed me even once; but phase c) "official negotiations" frequently suffers from performance anxiety. It is weird to see how the very same people, who were superactive in small-group arguing just a while ago, suddenly turn speechless when they are given floor as solo speakers at the negotiation table. This is definitely a weakness in my edu-larp concept. On the other hand, I do not want to remove the all-group official

¹² See my paper "Reliving Sarmatia" in *States of Play*.

talks, as they are deliberately put there to address problem 1: Varied exposure to edu-content (see above). My plan to tackle the challenge is to insert final-phase actions into the explicit tasks, e.g. “be the first to speak at the official meeting”, or even better, “you get 3 points if you are the first to speak at the official meeting”. This tactics proved its

Synergy of gameplay and role-play might be a powerful motivator – and if players refuse to role-play, then gameplay should single-handedly keep the larp running and educationally efficient.

efficiency in the first and second phase – we shall see how it works when tailored specifically for phase three.

Problem 6: General laziness of teachers and students

Solution: Print-and-play

With eyes set on the prospective mass usage, I want to “sell” to teachers a fairly simple scenario model, requiring minimum effort from teachers and students alike. On the teacher's side, the task is to print and distribute ready-made role sheets, and then moderate the larp (not necessarily in character). No costumes, props, room decoration or rehearsals are required. It should be possible to play the larp in the classroom and school corridors, without changing clothes, putting on make-up, or any other preparations apart from reading game materials. This is not a new idea: print-and-play sources for drama teachers are already available online (e.g. dramanotebook.com). However, they are targeted primarily at drama educators, and offer short dramatic activities. My idea is a full 90-minute class for teachers who do not have to be drama practitioners.

Problem 7: Game-based logic

Solution: No mechanics beyond social interaction

As “a major cause of problems with game-based learning”, Harviainen, Lainema & Saarinen (2012) discuss the “default to a game-based logic, instead of using the simulation/game as an opportunity to learn real-life practices and skills” (p. 2). In other words, people concentrate so much on winning the game that they lose sight of the educational functions. The problem of real-life skills is not at stake in historical edu-larping, as its learning

objective is to *understand how a system/process works* (or worked in the past), not to build practical skills for future use. Still, the possible harm related to strong emphasis on game-based logic made me consider the rationale behind my focus on task-orientation at the expense of world- and character-immersion.

I have observed such cases during the pilot study: guys apparently not immersed in characters or gameworld (judging by frequent out-of-character remarks and no attempts at historical stylisation) could nevertheless be deeply engaged in task-completion and in the conflicts between game parties. A high-standing aristocrat could yell to the queen “Hey, Queenie! Come over here, we need to talk”, which was a total disaster in terms of world- and character-immersion, but did not seem to spoil the game experience at all. In terms of GNS model, theirs was the gamist approach, non-immersive as it is (unless you see this case as immersion in the classroom activity). Nevertheless, although gamistic in nature, their involvement still resulted in thorough consideration and discussion of pre-designed historical issues, as there was no other way of progressing in the game. As long as educational content is properly embedded in core gameplay, game-based logic does not seem to be an impediment to learning.

5. CONCLUSION

In advocating edu-larps for use in Polish schools, my firm intention is to start with ‘larp for dummies’, putting no pressure on character immersion, actor/director skills, teacher-in-role or soft skill practice, focusing only on its efficiency in revising subject-matter knowledge. Why eliminate so many potential educational benefits? It’s not that I find low quality to be better than high quality - it’s because I find low quality larp better (as for now) than no larp at all. I am convinced this is the choice we are facing with thousands of prospective targets in Poland: unless larps are user-friendly to the utmost, they will only be used by a small minority.

Actually, I am an enthusiast of synergic cross-disciplinary teaching, totally on the side of immersion, art larps, creativity, soft skill development, etc. I have promoted (and had experienced myself) the transformative power of role playing in identity formation¹². I would love to see larps as “tools for personality

¹³ See my text *Less Larp in Edu-Larp Design* in the 2013 Knutepunkt book.

development" (Wingird, 2000) that "ask some essential questions . . . for pedagogical work" (Thestrup, 2007, p. 225), or "produce an even greater sense of catharsis than the plays and epic poems of Aristotle's times" (Bowman, 2010, p. 74), or even used as "agents for social change" (Marken, 2007). However, I believe these values have to be introduced in the second stage. First, we have to get with the least demanding print-and-play games to as many teachers as possible to lay foundations on which we can build. Then, it will be possible to encourage upgrades from low quality to high quality larping. I strongly believe the two-step approach is the only rational choice if we hope to smuggle larp into mainstream teaching.

Design-wise, if performance and immersion have been sidelined, it was necessary to focus on gamistic goal structures. Perhaps, in the design of goals/tasks the best choice would be to implement models from video games, as "Digital games and non-theatrical drama forms share similar strategies when applied to non-entertainment settings" (Cameron, Carroll & Wotzko, 2011, p. 1). Synergy of gameplay and role-play might be a powerful motivator – and if players refuse to role-play, then gameplay should single-handedly keep the larp running and educationally efficient. My recent interest in gamification of education inspired me to think of this type of larp as 'gamified drama'.

At the moment (March 2013), the research project on the efficiency of larp in teaching high-school history is nearing its end, with over 20 games run in 18 schools. Additionally, I wrote larp scenarios for the educational DEMOcracy Project (Mochocki, 2013), reaching 1100+ middle-schoolers in 64 larps. In all cases, I employed the same design model: problem-solving negotiations between political factions; divided into stages of preparation – unofficial talks – official debate; set in a specific historical moment; based on task achievement (in DEMOcracy, each task had a numerical value), with role-playing and immersion encouraged but not required. With an overwhelmingly positive feedback from both teachers and students, I find this model to be worth further development.

In future research, I am going to focus on two aspects I have not yet explored enough: 1) the application of design ideas from digital games and

gamification, 2) the addition of post-larp lesson plans for teachers¹³.

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Between Game Facilitation and Performance:

Interactive Actors and Non-Player Characters in Larps

Popular Abstract - The challenge of combining narrative and gameplay in live action role-playing games (larps) has been successfully negotiated with the use of runtime game mastering and interactive actors (ractors) performing non-player characters (NPC). Based on expert interviews six functions for the interactive actors (facilitating, content creation, character portrayal, entertaining, playing, safeguarding) are identified and explored. The paper also reviews existing literature on NPCs in larps, and goes on to offer design insights for runtime game mastering. In addition, certain practical aspects of separating non-player characters from the actors who perform them in pervasive games are considered.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Larps are a form of embodied and physical role-play, one where the participants pretend to be characters within a predefined context which is different from the everyday life.² There is a power structure in place that helps determine what is true within the fiction of the larp. Usually the larp organizers and their game masters have more control over the diegetic world. (Montola, 2012; Harviainen, 2012b; Brenne, 2005; Stenros, 2010; Mackay, 2001; Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2003).

Live action role-playing games (larps) combine narratives with gameplay. In these events the participants want to feel that they have an effect on how the events (i.e. the “story”) unfold, yet they also want the resulting sequence of events to form

a satisfying narrative. For the game designers, there is friction between crafting a satisfactory plot and ensuring player agency in narrative participatory fiction as the more closely a production follows pre-planned story structure, the less agency the player has (Peinado & Gervás, 2004; Jonsson et al., 2007; Jonsson & Waern, 2008). Although so called non-player character and interactive actors are common in larps, usually they are only discussed in passing in existing research literature. This study hopes to shed light on the matter.

In this paper the narrative challenges particular to larp are reviewed, and the possibilities offered by the use of interactive actors who perform non-player characters as part of runtime game

mastering are explored. The paper is primarily an interview study with interactive actors who have participated in one of two works of the Sweden-based The Company P that specializes in “participatory dramas”. The paper offers possible design solutions based on the interviews, as well as observation, design evaluation and related literature. Six functions for the interactive actors are identified and explored. In addition, certain practical aspects of separating non-player characters from the actors who perform them in pervasive games are considered.

Janet H. Murray (1997, p.151) has postulated that “[p]erhaps the most successful model of combining player agency with narrative coherence is a well-run larp game.” The analysis in this paper on the functions of ractors is not just documentation of a particular genre, but it has implications and relevance for helping to untangle some of the design challenges of narrative ludic events by exploring ways of negotiating story and game play, charting the experience of interactive actors, and helping understand how players negotiate the boundary between play and non-play by viewing events simultaneously as both.

First, previous research on this and closely related topics are discussed in order to frame the study. This is followed by a description of the methods and data used in the interview study. The heart of the article is the analysis of the functions of interactive actors based on the interviews, followed by an exploration of the boundary between the interactive actor and the non-player character performed. In the discussion section, the implications of the study are debated and contextualized to larps and games in general. Finally, the conclusions summarize the findings.

2. BACKGROUND

A common way to negotiate the challenge of balancing player agency and satisfactory narrative coherence is by limiting the options available to the players, and by fostering a false sense of agency. In digital games this is sometimes achieved through the use of a *forking path* the player may take through the game, or by providing an *open world* where the player can either pick her way through the forking paths of the plot by selecting missions, or explore the game world.² The problem with adapting the forking path approach to larps is that there is more than one player. Creating a net of interconnected forking paths for each player is

extremely difficult – unless the players are effectively treated as a single hive mind progressing through the game, as is common in alternate reality games (McGonigal, 2003), i.e. ARGs (e.g. Martin et al., 2006; Montola et al., 2009, pp. 37-40), or by removing the interlinking of the forking paths and sacrificing game world coherence, as is common in MMORPGs.

Navigating the task of leaving certain events up to the players (either as a group or as interlinked individuals) and fostering a sense of agency in larp is slightly different. One way to overcome the challenge is to use *fate play* (Fatland, 2005). In fate play the player is instructed on how to act at one or a few specific times (e.g. after the dinner you confront your father, or declare your love to your fiancée when the woman in the blue dress leaves the room) and these fates form a net that drives the plot. Outside of them the character can do as she pleases, in the confines of the setting, the rules, and the character itself.

Weaving a web of fates is a complicated task, and it makes the structure partially visible to the players. It also means that the number of characters is set; if a character is removed the web may collapse and additional characters not tied to the web may feel disconnected from the game. Goals written into pre-created characters, even if they are not absolute commands in the form of fates, also form a net and thus any larp where characters have been created by the game organizers can be seen as a lighter version of fate play.

The challenge with the open world approach is more nuanced. A digital game is colloquially termed an open world or a sandbox fairly liberally; providing a little bit more world to explore and giving the players the freedom of choice regarding the order of carrying out missions is sometimes called a sandbox, whereas from the point of view of larps this just seems like a thematic amusement park. As said, in a larp the players can do anything not prohibited by the rules, setting, or character, and thus have much more affordances than in digital games, where all but the social inter-player affordances need to be implemented through code. In digital games open worlds tend to be just elaborate forking paths, whereas even non-pervasive larps require limitations for a coherent designer-initiated narrative to emerge. Thus if the game organizers do not want to use fate play or

pre-create characters, the alternative is very work intensive: *runtime game mastering*.

“In order to perform runtime game mastering, three things are needed: a system for tracking and monitoring player activities and the events in their vicinity, a processing system which helps the game masters keep track of the input information and construct an overall picture of the ongoing event, and an actuating system which enables them to influence player activity.” (Jonsson et al., 2006)

Though it is possible to use technology to aid with these tasks, it is usually much easier, faster, and robust for the game masters to use human agents (see e.g. Jonsson et al, 2006; 2007; Montola et al., 2009, Stenros et al., 2007a; Bichard & Waern, 2008).³ In addition to the three requirements listed above, some form of narrative structure is also needed to help guide the situation. Even in special cases where a narrative is not the aim, rules that create a coherent world are needed.

2.1 NPCs and Ractors

The human agents that interact with players as part of runtime game mastering have been called non-player characters, instructed players, actors and interactive actors. All of the terms are problematic: Actor refers not just to one who does, but also to a person performing for an audience; non-player character refers to a diegetic role not inhabited by a player, yet they are usually portrayed by players – though with less agency; interactive actor and instructed player are both tautologous, as all actors are interactive and all players receive some

NPC is thus, especially in larp, a relational term. All player characters receive instructions from the game organizers and unless the NPC is played by a game master there is player influence in its portrayal.

instructions. These terms are understandable only in relation to an unnamed standard, an implied player or a normal actor.

The term non-player character originates in tabletop role-playing games. There it is used to

refer to characters portrayed by the game master. It has since migrated to both digital games, where it denoted characters controlled by the game program,⁴ and to larp, where it is used to refer to characters with less agency (i.e. controlled more by the game masters) than characters portrayed by average players.

NPC is thus, especially in larp, a relational term. All player characters receive instructions from the game organizers and unless the NPC is played by a game master there is player influence in its portrayal. The specific meaning of the term also varies between different larp cultures. For example some UK larpers consider all characters not created by the player herself as NPCs.⁵ Often the distinction between a player character and an NPC is economic; playing an NPC can be cheaper than playing a PC. At times players also need to put in hours as an NPC; they play their primary character for most of the larp, but take a break at some point to play an adversarial NPC for the benefit of other players (cf. Stark, 2012).

Poor though these terms are, in this article I shall use the terms *ractor* (short for interactive actor) to refer to the person performing the function and playing, and *non-player character* (NPC) when referring to the position they hold within the diegesis on the game world. The term ractor was used by the production team at The Company P, and probably originates in Neal Stephenson's cyberpunk novel *The Diamond Age* (Murray, 1997, p.121)

2.2 Different aesthetics

Runtime game masters are a subset of game *facilitators*, which are common in numerous, especially non-digital, games (see Björk & Holopainen, 2005, pp.23-24; Stenros & Sotamaa, 2009). From the person who acts as the bank in *Monopoly* to croupiers and referees, maintaining the game system is an important task. Also, in simulations and simulation-like games there are people who are responsible for running the event (sometimes called *operators*, see Crookall et al., 1987). However, the ractor's job is different from these two facilitator functions in two ways: First, the ractor is not just following a set on instructions. Reducing her job to a simple flow chart would miss central elements, mostly because the ractor needs to respond to unexpected player contributions in a way that is logical and believable within the diegetic frame, and that keeps the game on the

right track. Second, the ractor is not only responsible for maintaining the game system and responding in a set way to the players' action, but she is supposed to provide believability, coherence and colour as well. The facilitator function is thus hidden inside a character, an independent part of the game world. In many cases there is also an aesthetic dimension to this, as the facilitating is made in a way that is invisible to the players, or in a way that the players can easily explain within the diegetic frame without having to resort to extra-diegetic motivations.

Similarly *actors* and *performers* are an integral part of participatory performances and theatre. A particularly relevant point of comparison can be found from the "cultural performances" staged in "living history" museums, such as Plimoth Plantation, where actor/historians portray historical figures (the "pilgrims" who escaped religious persecution in Europe and settled in what would one day become Massachusetts) in an everyday setting for the education and

The interview lengths varied from 30 to 100 minutes, averaging just below the 60 minute mark.

entertainment of museum visitors (Snow, 1993; also Schechner, 1985, pp.79-91). However, there is a difference in comparison to the portrayal of non-player characters in larps, as in most performances there is an implicit assumption that it is *for* an audience. Even participatory theatre usually has severe limitations on what forms the player/viewer contributions can take. There is a major aesthetic difference between viewing the performance of the actors as the main thing – and awarding the players that status in a participatory experience (cf. Lancaster, 1999, pp.106-110; Stenros, 2010).⁶ Even the pilgrims at Plimoth Plantation, whose portrayal involves a strong role-play component, are performed for an audience that is not part of the staged fiction.

In a rough way it is possible to differentiate between the core of a performance (what is represented and how skilfully), a narrative (the partially pre-planned sequence of events that form a satisfying whole) and play (the activity of playing, competing, collaborating and co-creating).

Though these are crude caricatures, they do communicate some of the expectations a participant has towards her experience.

Though conflicting, *Nordic larps* (Stenros & Montola, 2010) have found ways to successfully combine these three aesthetics, using for example first person audience to marry immersion, inter-immersion and performances that are partly only enacted for the self (Stenros, 2010), by using fate play and strong themes to guide plots (Fatland, 2005), by framing both winning and losing as successful play, for example though positive negative experiences (Montola, 2010; Hopeametsä, 2008) and so on. Managing player expectations and knowledge of the tradition help negotiate the friction between the varying expectations of performance, narrative and game. However, these techniques require that the player-participant is actively involved in the negotiation process. When a work is aimed at a more general audience, as is the case with the games analyzed below, audience members often have an expectation that more of the work is carried by the event organizers. Managing these expectations is part of what the ractors do.

3. METHODS AND DATA

This paper is primarily based on interviews with six people who have performed as interactive actors in larp/ARG hybrid *Conspiracy For Good*. These expert-interviews were conducted in four face-to-face settings. The interview lengths varied from 30 to 100 minutes, averaging just below the 60 minute mark.

The interviewees were chosen by the researcher based on their visibility to the players (the seven most prominent ractors were targeted, and all but one were interviewed successfully) and their self-identified expert backgrounds (two from each: larp/role-play, theatre, and neither). Two of the interviewees were women, four were men, and they hailed from the United States, United Kingdom, Jamaica and Sweden.

In addition, one ractor interview from larp/ARG hybrid *Sanningen om Marika* (Denward, 2011) was included in the sample (interview 7, female, Swedish). This interview, conducted for previous research (Stenros & Montola, 2011a) first via email and later in person, acted as the original impetus for this line of questioning. *Sanningen om Marika* was co-created by The Company P, which has a

history of using Nordic larp derived methods in works aimed at a larger audience. Once they announced a new project using similar ractor techniques, *Conspiracy For Good*, ractors were identified as a topic of interest in the its research. This paper concentrates on this one aspect of CFG, others have been explores previously elsewhere (Stenros et al., 2011; also Stenros & Montola, 2010b).

All interviews, aside from the one email interview, were semi-structured, and later transcribed by a professional agency. The interview topics, as well as the interpretation of the interviews, were influenced by the researcher's long-term experiences with participatory studies of pervasive larps. For example CFG was studied by a team that followed the production and running of the game, conducted participatory observation, played the game, and conducted interviews and an online survey with the players (Stenros et al., 2011). The author has also previously participated in a pervasive larp called *Momentum* as a character that helped runtime game mastering (see Stenros et al., 2007a).

This study is exploratory in nature. Mentions relating to interactive acting and game mastering were identified in the resulting text documents, and these mentions were sorted with open coding. The interviews, rich in data partially due to the variance in the tasks performed, are analyzed qualitatively to produce a picture of how ractors are used by this particular production company and in this particular gaming culture. Seven interviews and two productions are not enough to make sweeping general claims. However, when data from other sources support the findings, this is pointed out. It should be noted that as an ARG/larp hybrid CFG is *not* a typical larp in terms of, for example, production, financing, player base, employed technology, or advertising. Most importantly for the current discussion, it targeted a more mainstream audience and employed ractors with no background in role-playing. While this makes it a particularly interesting target for this kind of investigation due to the spectrum it provides (how different approaches employed by ractors worked, how to manage player expectations when numerous players are unfamiliar with the game genre etc.), these very differences mark it apart from, for example, a more typical Nordic larp production.

4. FUNCTIONS OF AN INTERACTIVE ACTOR

Ractors who perform non-player characters may be called upon to carry out numerous different tasks as demanded by the actions of the live, co-present group of players who contribute and even co-create – and as demanded by the game design and the runtime game mastering. The core of their work is to portray a character (or at least a caricature or a role) that serves a narrative or ludic purpose, and that task cannot be completely disconnected from facilitating, content creation, entertaining and playing. Not all ractors perform all of these functions, but this is the scope of their possible functions.

“The big difference between being a ractor and being just a normal stage or movie actor is that you are constantly exposed to your audience, and they are always going to push and pull the story in directions that you can never fully control. Nor should you control them: A great part of the charm of interactive drama is that the players feel like they are making the decisions - even when they are not. So being a ractor on the field is actually a lot more like being a table top game master, softly trying to manipulate the players to follow the adventure track you have laid out for them.” (Ractor 7, email interview)

In the following these different facets of the work the ractor may be asked to perform are identified. The division presented here emerged in the coding. Some of the functions have been discussed elsewhere previously, while others are less typical in literature. Notice how the functions of a ractor as a content creator, entertainer and as a safeguard are grounded in the division between performers and an audience, whereas the functions of playing and facilitating are more grounded in a view of playing together. Character portrayal is torn between the two.

4.1 Facilitating

A major function of the ractor is to facilitate playing through *runtime game mastering*. They do their best to ensure that players find the relevant clues, stay on track, do not get bogged down with irrelevant details, keep the time-table, do not start fighting amongst themselves (more than is entertainingly dramatic), ensure that relevant

technology is working, and come up with workarounds if it is not, stay in contact with the game mastering headquarters and so on.

[I]f you have 85 to 100 people on the roof of a building and you're trying to tell a story that everybody can understand but also participate in, you need to have people on the ground floor saying this isn't working, this is working, here's how fast we can get people from point A to point B. And if nothing else, you have timing. It's more of a choreographer than it is game mastering. (Ractor 2)

Runtime game mastering, at least for a large group of players, is usually carried on by a team, and task division is important. *Pacing*, timing the game events, came up as an important facet of the ractors

However, at times incorporating player initiatives simply is not feasible. Rejecting those ideas while maintaining believability is one of the hardest challenges a ractor meets

task list in the interviews, confirming earlier research (e.g. Bichard & Waern, 2008; Jonsson et al., 2007). The ractor is the eyes, ears and hands of the game mastering team, but she usually lacks the bird's eye view. When the playing is at its most active, the ractor usually cannot contact the headquarters (due to e.g. lack of time or restriction on breaking character); she is on her own and must make the relevant decision based on the game design (cf. Crabtree et al., 2004).

NPCs often *mentor* the players. They teach game mechanics, facts about the game world, and exemplify the story logic relevant for the experience, and lead by example. In essence the mentor characters show instead of just telling. They set the tone of the game, established the limits of expected and tolerated behaviour, and provide a social alibi by doing possibly embarrassing tasks as an example.⁷

"[The ractor character] was doing the same journey as the participants, but he knew slightly more, so if someone didn't follow the story completely, he would be there to help them. (Ractor 1)

Remember that most people are really, really genuinely afraid of behaving weird in public places, and in the presence of strangers [...]. So you need to lead by example. What you do is usually what they perceive is the "limit" of allowed behavior in game. The more you do, the more they dare to do. But don't take over. Find some excuse to leave as soon as you think them competent to handle the situation." (Ractor 7, email)

Kurt Lancaster (1999, pp.33-41) has documented that in a US-based larp from 1990 the game master could, in addition to using NPCs, narrate events and mentor extra-diegetically. In *CFG* all mentoring and example setting were done diegetically, even the instructions on how to play the game and how the game mechanics functioned were given by NPCs in accordance with the diegetic world.

"Know your mythos, and know your character inside and out. When you're in the field, there is no one there to give you your line if your mind goes blank when someone asks you what your mother's maiden name was, or in what psychiatric clinic your friend was locked up, or whatever it is that people might think to ask you. But keep in mind that you only need to know the stuff that your character *would* know, and that most of that stuff isn't important, as long as you stick to the same story every time you tell it. Don't be afraid to improvise, leave stuff open so you can fill it in as you go." (Ractor 7, email, emphasis in original)

Knowing the game design thoroughly (the mythos, the plot, the character, the mechanics, the timetable etc.) is imperative, if the ractor is portraying a central character (cf. Snow, 1993, pp.124-132). A well-prepared ractor may even change element of the game design on the fly, if unforeseen player actions prompt her. However, this is hardly a requirement for all NPCs; some NPCs are more like functions. They only carry out tasks given by the game masters, like pointing the player-characters in the right direction.

One of the challenges is unforeseen player ideas. The ractor needs to be able to think on her feet and steer the game. Sometimes this means coaxing the players towards certain outcomes, teaching how to

use certain hardware, or even making sly changes in the overall story.

“The hardest part has been answering up to questioning, when people come up with a greater plan than the one you had already. And you can’t really let them go through with it.” (Ractor 1)

Sometimes when a player presents an unforeseen elegant solution to a problem, the ractor can adopt it and act accordingly. However, at times incorporating player initiatives simply is not feasible. Rejecting those ideas while maintaining believability is one of the hardest challenges a ractor meets.

Managing expectations and communicating the logic of the game and its genre are also key issues in guiding player contributions towards ideas that are easier to incorporate. However, if a work welcomes player contributions there is a risk of getting some contributions that do not fit the whole.

Ractors may also be *undercover*. Though usually the non-player characters are relatively easy to spot even if they are not announced in any way, it is also possible to use ractors as *plants*, to have ractors who pretend to be just “normal players” and use them to steer the game. Finally, ractors perform seemingly menial *supporting tasks* (repair the technology, cook food) that are important for the running of the game and the well-being of the players. Also, sometimes ractors simply report what the players are doing to the game mastering headquarters (Stenros et al., 2007a). Though not proper ractors unless they portray characters, such members of the support staff do share the facilitation function on the ground level.

4.2 Content creator

In production terms the ractor *creates content* for the participants. Portraying a character online is very much a performance in *writing*, however in face-to-face real-time interactions the ractor is usually not performing her character based on a strict script with pre-written dialogue. *Improvisation* takes over. Even when the same person is portraying the same character both online and offline (i.e. produces both the character’s bodily presence and her textual output) these are very different functions.

“In the game design, I consider that it’s about realizing what will take people time,

what will let people have fun, what makes it dynamic and pervasive, what can you interact with and just not consume. As a writer, you’re good at writing stuff that people can read afterwards that is slightly less interactive, I think.” (Ractor 1)

Though some games have used a relatively strict pre-written script also for the live action events (e.g. Bichard & Waern, 2008), CFG opted for a less structured approach. Script can be helpful even when there is less structure; it is possible to write pieces of dialogue, standard utterances for a character, or monologues that hopefully can be delivered organically when a moment arises. However, the importance of listening and reacting to player action is paramount.

“As far as interacting with other people, improvisation becomes hard when you don’t listen and when you don’t hear what’s being said to you, because then, if you’re busy trying to think about what you’re going to say back. You can’t write a conversation that’s happening. You need to have the conversation.” (Ractor 2)

“Even if it’s scripted it’s still freestyling.” (Ractor 6)

A central factor is the choice of media, or rather, stage. Online the NPCs can have blogs and videoblogs, use various web forums, Twitter, Facebook and IRC, be available through email, instant messenger and Skype.⁸ Some of these are asynchronous channels, others work in real-time. If the portrayal of a character is divided, it is not uncommon to do it along the line of synchronous/asynchronous – and it is possible to have a team that puts together a character’s responses (cf. Stenros & Montola, 2011a). However, in live street events (and video calls) the ractor must improvise. When a ractor performs a character without the safety net of the rest of the production team, the work changes:

“It has been very different though when I’ve been at the events and when I’ve been online. Online I’ve felt a lot more that I’ve been game mastering and trying to keep the continuity of everything. But at the events I’ve very much been feeling that I’ve been playing as much as I have been game mastering.” (Ractor 1)

It must also be stressed, that the sheer physicality of the ractors in a live situation adds an element not present online. Online play is more cerebral, centring on mental or social puzzles, and although there is a physical element for example in mastering a digital game such as the mobile phone games used in *CFG*, the difference to interacting with an intimidating representative of a security team is different.

“As a gaming experience for them, I think there’s something really exciting for [the players] to be involved in a game where they’re actually having a physical duel with a performer in a way, rather than an intellectual one.” (Ractor 3)

Some of the ractors reported witnessing visceral player reactions (e.g. sweating, shaking). A game does not need to be physical to have a physical effect on its player (see Montola, 2010), but visceral gameplay and perceived physical threat certainly can help achieve it. The co-presence of another human being has an effect in itself. The players seem less distances and less critical when faced with an actual human being.

4.3 Character

The interviewed ractors also drive the narrative. Facilitation, content creation and character portrayal are all part of the narrative project, but the character – due to its diegetic nature – sits at the core. The character a ractor portrays is built around the functional needs identifies by the game masters.

The ractors in *CFG* can roughly be divided into two groups based on how they constructed their experiences: those who had an acting background and those who had a background in (live action) role-playing games.⁹ Role-players approached the character as a totality with an inner life, goals, hopes and personal quirks. Inhabiting the character was seen as important and the character was usually built (or tailored) around the ractor’s own personality. For them, understanding the fictional world, its history, and logic (i.e. the mythos) was also important, as that helps them improvise in a situation as they will be able to understand and anticipate how their actions fit in the larger picture.

“Yeah, I mean it is kind of blurry in the sense that I think you spend hours with people, and you’d be online or then now in

person, that no matter how much of a character you are, you’re not going to stop being you. It could be a layer on a layer on a layer, but there’s still the core of who you are.” (Ractor 2)

“The only way to deal with [players coming up with unexpected ideas] is to really know your mythos like the back of your hand, so that you feel free to improvise and invent new stuff at the drop of a hat.” (Ractor 7, email interview)

The theatre ractors emphasized methods of acting and built a performance conceived of as judged by the player-audience. A consistent portrayal of a character, or its inner life was not important. Too much knowledge – even about the character they are portraying – will hinder the improvisation.

“I think it’s important that we don’t get briefed too much. If you become briefed too much, then when you’re confronted with an improvised scenario, it becomes very difficult to break out of the brief. [... S]ome of it’s part-scripted, some of it’s part-improvvised, and often the improvised bits are more liberating in some way, as long as you’re disciplined within the scenario.” (Ractor 3)

The ractors with an improvisation background tended to consider themselves as performing tasks and fulfilling functions. Ractor 3 noted: “We were given a brief, and we just follow it as though it’s an order from the boss.” Role-players are more accustomed to thinking about the game design, whereas improvisational actors are more focused on the experience of the player-audience present in that moment. For them it is not a problem that the character they portray is one thing for one viewer and another for someone else, as long as the resulting scenes are good. From a role-playing point of view this is abhorrent, as it is possible that the players will discuss the character and discover a discontinuity. Indeed, larpwright Eirik Fatland (2012) has noted that one of the fundamentals of larp is that “[p]layers can be separated from each other, and still maintain the same fiction when they meet again.”

Also, the role is important for the role-player. It can be tweaked on the fly, but the essence should not change.¹⁰ For the improviser a strict character is a

hindrance which may prevent ideas from being used. Obviously even the ractors with an improvisation background had structure ("the scenario").

There was a third group of ractors as well; those who had neither a background in role-playing nor in improvisational theatre. They played characters that were basically fictionalized versions of their everyday personas. See below for more on this group.

As finding a person who is both an accomplished improvisational actor and has an eye towards game mastering is difficult, a division of NPC types and the matching ractor profiles developed. The role-players were cast in roles that required game mastering skills, understand what can and cannot be done, what can and cannot be changed on the fly, whereas the improvisational actors were cast in roles that sought to entertain.

"You need a large (-) and extensive improvisation acting background, I think. Also, it would have been very hard to do if I hadn't been so deeply involved in the project and in the creation of the project that I always had the mandate to change things on the fly. I couldn't really have, even if I hired an actor who could do the job, that actor couldn't have had the mandate at the time to change the things that I've been changing continuously throughout the process." (Ractor 1)

"And we tried to look for another actress, but then eventually we realized that there's nobody else who can do this, there's nobody else who is so much, I mean, tuned into this whole story." (Ractor 7)

Understanding the production, its limits, genre, scope and logic, is very important. Bringing in an actor not familiar with the project to play a role that requires game mastering is difficult and requires a lot of briefing. This has a tendency to lead to a number of the game designers playing pivotal NPC roles.

"And more importantly it saved us time, because we didn't have to brief somebody on the in-depth back story on who they are and why they know things, and why they don't know certain things." (Ractor 2)

The downside is that using people who are already involved in the project add to the already large workload, these people are rarely trained actors and they cannot be chosen for a specific character (e.g. have the correct accent), but it is more common to build a character around them.

Finally, there is the issue of breaking character. Though most ractors perform non-player characters continuously and do not address game participants as anything other than as their characters, players – especially if they do not have clear characters to play – may attempt to move the ractor from the diegetic *frame* (Goffman, 1974, pp. 40-82; Fine, 1983, pp.181-204; Stenros et al., 2007b) to the frame of gameplay. Sometimes this is done just to test the ractor, to see if she is able to

In some cases the ractors have made a conscious choice to not know too much about the missions they are on, in order to be on equal footing with the players – and in order to play

maintain character (cf. Snow, 1993, p.71), but it can also be done accidentally. After all, the characters fill numerous functions, and these functions operate on different levels (e.g. within the diegesis, on the level on game facilitation).

"Yeah, they tried to break character, quite a few people tried to do that. If it was on a low level, I would usually just stay in character, and I would try to ignore out-of-character comments or out of game comments. And that worked really well, people caught on to that very fast and they stopped using out of character things. But at the same time, when people had serious questions that my character couldn't answer and I realized it was important, then I would tell them, I would tell people things that was out of my character. Like for example where should I leave my phone back or whatever." (Ractor 1)

"In game time, the players, really hardcore players stay in-game the whole time, in character. But there are some people who are new to this, realize this is a game, and will snap in and out of character. And they'll come up to you and ask you a question that's a very much out of

character question. But the brilliant thing is we can give this broad answer that fits for both our real life and for our character. The characters are modelled after us. We don't have to break game to talk to people who do break game." (Ractor 6)

The design ideal is that a ractor never breaks character. If the only way to address a character is by doing so with the fictional framework, this contributes to the shared pretend play:¹¹

"As a game character: *Never go off game in front of players*. If there is a need to explain that this is just a game, let someone else explain it. Don't ever do it yourself as this will present the opportunity to "off game" with you at any moment. Being completely in game all the time will encourage them to take the world you've built seriously, force them to interact with you in game - as that is the *only* way to interact with you." (Ractor 7, email, emphasis in original)

In practice ractors do sometimes break character, or experience moments where they are unsure if they have broken character (cf. Snow, 1993, p.223, note 3). Lack of clear, articulated boundaries of play can make this particularly difficult.

4.4 Entertainer

The ractor entertains the players. By playing parts that would not be enjoyable or meaningful for a player, and parts required by the game design but which cannot be given to players, she provides structure. The supporting roles are usually mostly functional, but portraying key characters, e.g. the antagonists, provides a site for outrageous performances. In the production meetings it was noted again and again that players love a good villain.

As CFG was aimed at a relatively general audience, many participants (especially in the earlier live events) did not so much role-play than just play a game. For those participants the ractors were very much like the aforementioned actor/historians at Plimoth Plantation (Snow, 1993), performers who facilitated their playing and entertained them. Such participants embraced a position more as an audience than as fully participating players.

In addition, if there are breaks in the game in some way, for example a story beat needs to be pushed back, or the technology breaks down, someone needs to keep the players engaged and entertained. The goal is to foster the community of players, with possibly providing new content or add simple game design elements.

"[T]here was like two weeks when I didn't have much story to tell, so I basically attempted to maintain the people we had hooked from the beginning with, simple leads in the chat room, videos and telling little bits of stories and giving clues, which people I think are just now starting to be like oh, you actually said something that was pertinent." (Ractor 2)

4.5 Player

The ractor employs dual vision while playing and performing (cf. Fine 1983; Mackay 2001, pp.63-118). She is aware both of the events within the diegesis, but also considers the implications of the events of the game design and the project overall.

"So, during most of the time I was just, you know, in [character] mode. Of course I mean, I was a game master too, so I did all of that stuff. But I was still in that mindspace where I interpreted everything that came to me in the way that [the character] would've." (Ractor 7)

The players, especially the ones who understand this type of games and have played them before, also have this kind of a dual vision, viewing events both as part of a game and from an external point of view. However, the ractor is attempting to not just see the situation in two lights, but to construct it on two levels.

The game mastering part is covered above, but the element of play within the diegesis should not be forgotten either. Though ractors are mostly concerned with facilitating the experience of others, they also get (and should get) carried away by the playing.

"[Performing my character is] like the most fun game of dress-up you can imagine. It's, I mean, the only thing that's cooler than that is actually I guess going undercover and being somebody else, and having nobody know you're somebody and just

believing you, because this gives you the caveat where people, you get a little bit of leeway.” (Ractor 2)

In some cases the ractors have made a conscious choice to not know too much about the missions they are on, in order to be on equal footing with the players – and in order to play. Obviously there are cases where such an attitude does not work, but in a large production not everyone needs to know the intricacies of each task.

“And he says “The whole time we were trying to figure out the puzzle, you knew, didn’t you? You were standing there and you knew.” [...] Half the time I’m like yeah, I was just waiting for you guys to find it. Or the version where I’m like actually it was just true some of the time, actually I make it a point to not know some of the things as far the answers. I know what the puzzles are going to going to be, I don’t know how they’re solved. So if I actually get involved and they say can you help, I most certainly will try to help.” (Ractor 2)

This has parallels with how researchers participate in games as players. If a researcher has access to the game production, she can easily have deeper knowledge about a game’s design than a player. Staying silent and trying not to guide the playing in any relevant way is important, as a participant observer is not researching her own play (see Stenros et al., 2012). Yet the experience of play can be very important for her in understanding not just the game but also the experiences reported by the players. Thus choosing to not know everything in advance can be a relevant course of action also for a researcher.

4.6 Safeguard

The questions of authenticity and believability are complex when dealing with a piece of genre fiction played physically in a public space. The ractors need to track numerous variables in all interactions with the players: Does the interaction feel authentic? Does it fit the expectations of the genre? Does it serve the game? Is the character I am portraying internally consistent? However, these game experience questions need to be weighted against issues of safety. Is the activity safe for the participants? How will the interaction be perceived

by the bystanders? How to stop situations from escalating out of control?

“There were certain boundaries put in place obviously, and talk of escalation, because it’s a public arena. On one level you prepare as you would any kind of performance work, but it’s got to be more open-ended. You can’t start asking yourself psychological questions, like, well, this guy comes to me, my character would do that, stuff like that. That cannot happen. So, preparation is more preparing yourself as a human being rather than as a character. [...] You make your own decisions based on safety and appropriate behaviour. [...] So what we do, because we have a background in martial arts as well, so there was a confluence between what we can do physically and appropriate behaviour for those particular young people. So we dealt with them physically, safely but also in an exciting way.” (Ractor 3)

The organizers of pervasive larps cannot guarantee the safety of the players (Montola et al., 2009), but that does not mean that they should ignore safety either. Especially in commercial productions such as *CFG* there is also the ever looming issue of liability, usually negotiated with wordy legal waivers players must sign before play commences.

“Depends what city you’re in, but some towns have higher restrictions of health and safety. And health and safety can kill a project like this.” (Ractor 3)

In *CFG* the ractors with a background in improvisation de-prioritized the internal coherence of their characters, but that still left numerous other interconnected and conflicting considerations. The players wanted a believable experience, but a safe one. It is possible to stage a situation where a security guard threatens players in a way that is believable on the surface, but where no actual threat to the players exists. However, doing that in a way that communicates the lack of threat also to the bystanders is very hard, at least unless the game is not marked clearly as a game or a performance. This was not done in *CFG*, and many bystanders mistook the fictional security guards for real ones.

“And I found the perception of us [private security guard characters], especially over the last two events, their perception actually became us. So all the security guards around here thought we were security guards. The drug dealers thought we were undercover police. [My co-ractor] and I apprehended one of the players, he was an Asian guy, started looking through his bag. And several of the Asian restaurant owners came, come and search us, don’t you dare, they thought we were undercover police.” (Ractor 4)

At one point in the game actual police did show up. The security guard ractors took off their mirror shades and walked up to the police. They explained the situation (the production had all the relevant permissions for putting on a game-performance in that area), but in a way that for those who did not hear their discussion, it seemed like a standard situation of guards chatting with cops (cf. Goffman, 1963, esp. p.91, 178). This they did in order to ensure authenticity – also, they did not want to look like clownish pretend-rent-a-cops in the eyes of the bystanders who mistook them for real security personnel.

The ractors were also conscious of the trapping of the power they pretended to have and mention this as yet another thing one need to be mindful of. In one of the events bystanders had complained to actual security guards about the number of security personnel in the area.

“What they were complaining about, and what they weren’t pleased about was they didn’t like the police presence in the area. They found it intimidating, the police presence, which was us. Not one person said there’s two guys running around upsetting people. They said they don’t like these police presence, we don’t know who these people are, but it’s making us all feel very uncomfortable. So we really were whatever we were supposed to be, which is very shady as it is, for the whole time we were around here.” (Ractor 4)

On the one hand this shows, as Ractor 3 noted in the interview, that pervasive games highlight the frictions and problems in a society. On the other hand it can be questioned if it is acceptable to stage these kinds of games in a public setting if it upsets

the bystanders. As *CFG* was produced by Nokia, everything was done in adherence to laws and regulations, and the bystanders were not harassed in any direct way, but the game did seem to make numerous bystanders uneasy. Striking the correct balance is a challenge.

5. CHARACTERS AND ACTORS

Two additional issues relating to the boundary between ractors and the NPCs they perform emerged in the interviews. These boundary issues do not fit under general functions of ractors, but relate to the specific situation of portraying a character inspired by the actor and to the ownership of the NPC. For a game designer NPCs are design tools, created to fill functional needs.

“My character came about I think just maybe three weeks before the launch [...] when we realized that we needed one of us that could always be online. [...] And it was, (-) realized that it would be impossible to hire someone from the outside to work on those basis.” (Ractor 1)

The game designer identifies the functions a character needs to fill and, with perhaps an eye towards who will play the character, fleshes out the NPC. Role-player ractors use detailed characters whereas improvisational ractors prefer character sketches. Although the persona of a character may be just filling to keep the functional parts together, as play takes over, these parts may acquire a larger importance. It is in play that the character becomes.

5.1 Playing yourself

In pervasive games that blur the line between the fictional story world and the real world, it is not uncommon to create characters based on their actors, to the point that the characters and the actors have the same name and background. In *CFG* there were two such characters and in *Sanningen om Marika* there was one (Stenros & Montola, 2011a; 2011b). The reasoning behind this design choice is believability and the resulting seamless experience. Though seemingly these actors are playing themselves, they are always fictionalized versions with characteristics added that their players do not associate with themselves (e.g. braver, more outgoing, able to code, single).

“It’s definitely a separate character. My character’s a lot bolder and a lot more confrontational and not as careful as my

real-life character is. [...] But my character, I definitely feel there's more of a different (-) here that's between my character and my actual self. For example, my character definitely wouldn't be married. She never mentions a husband and travels much." (Ractor 6)

Having "fictionalized real people" adds an interesting flavour to a production. It does enhance the seamlessness when it is possible for a player to go online and read up on a character on a "real" website. However, playing yourself means you need to be more mindful of setting limits for the playing, as the limits created by a character are missing in some senses.

"Know what the goal is, know what the limits are, I mean what are you willing to do, what are you not willing to do. Decide that beforehand. And most importantly, know when it ends. I mean, set the boundaries beforehand. Because once you get sucked into it, it's very easy to just let everything go." (Ractor 7)

A further complication is created if the gameplay is recorded. Whilst the participants who are present at an event are aware that a game is played and thus regular rules and norms are transformed, once the proceedings are filmed, they can become recontextualized in a way that the original playful framing is lost.

"I was just playing me and I refused to change [laughs]. I was like no way am I doing this scene like this, no. I wouldn't do it, and the character [has my name]. You know what I mean? And my friends will watch this. It's hard to follow the story obviously just in these blogs and they're like "What are you doing?"'" (Ractor 5)

In addition to having fictionalized real people, these games also feature fictional characters one can have a real relationship with. All these *simulacrum people* make parasocial relationship more complex and possibly more interesting (cf. Stenros & Montola, 2011a).

5.2 Character ownership

It is not uncommon for a simulacrum person to not be controlled by a single person. The character's actions can be plotted by game designers and the

asynchronous communication written by a writer, while video messages and live events are handled by an actor. However, sometimes key characters are given to specific persons, mostly to ensure that someone is intimately familiar with that character's backstory – and everything that has happened to her – even if that means that the character cannot be available 24 hours a day.

"It was finding the balance between the cool thing in interacting with a character at the same time as keeping up the availability of the character." (Ractor 1)

As the online part of *CFG* started to gather more players from around the world, characters owned and portrayed by Europe-based ractors were not enough. Ractors needed to be recruited from other time zones as well. In *CFG* numerous key characters were handled by specific performers, as that was perceived as a cool feature, one that fosters the believability and authenticity of the experience. Indeed, when players who have interacted with a character online first meet a character face-to-face, it is not uncommon for the players to 'test' actors, to find out if the seams of the production show.

"It's like when certain people first meet you, like the ones that I've been seeing online, they test you a little bit. They give you that little side-eye, and when they talk to you and you respond in character, they all sort of start to smile. And so you know they're kind, and then they'll ask you some questions, but they won't do it in character, they'll test you to see if you know, kind of thing." (Ractor 2)

Ensuring character ownership can be cumbersome, yet it does help in fostering parasocial relationship between player and characters. Although fostering individual connections between NPCs and players can be time-consuming, it is a key aspect of the form of pervasive larp. Obviously such connections cannot be established with all players. However, the players pulled in by the game can be harnessed as sort of *ambassadors*, expert players who navigate between new incoming player and the game organizers.

6. DISCUSSION

Players are aware that they are playing a game and that they are interacting with actors (to the point

that they sometimes mistake other players for interactive actors, see Stenros et al., 2011). They may not comprehend the total game design, but they are willing to play not just the game, but with the design and the game organizers, trying the limits of the game and the ractors. Trying to pinpoint the boundaries of a game can become a game in itself.

The players are aware of the friction between narrative and agency. Part of learning to play these kinds of games is to understand what parts the players can influence and what they cannot. Yet some players want to push those boundaries – and the game organizers often also wish to craft an experience that gives players a much larger sense of agency than what they actually have. The task of the ractor – and the runtime game masters – is usually to take the player from story point A to story point B in a way that seems organic, logical, and unforced – while keeping the game moving, the player entertained, the world coherent and the player safe.

However, the task of negotiating the friction between narrative and agency does not rest on just

Part of learning to play these kinds of games is to understand what parts the players can influence and what they cannot.

the ractors' shoulders. The players do their part. A central consideration in larps and similar embodied, participatory and co-creative endeavours is the difference between *aesthetics of spectating* and *aesthetics of action* (Stenros, 2010; MacDonald, 2012). As participants are not just an audience expecting to be entertained, the dynamic between the event creator and the participant changes. In doing the participant becomes co-creator, and what she appreciates is not just what she perceive as being performed, but what she herself contributes. And as has been shown repeatedly, many players actively try to work towards fostering a coherent, shared encounter – even when there are obvious discontinuities or technological problems (e.g. Drozd et al., 2001; see also Aylett & Louchart, 2003). However, the participant needs to understand her role in the proceedings for this to work. Clear rules and clearly articulated line between play and non-play help (cf. Murray, 1997, p.106). Otherwise the player

can be confused – or preoccupied with finding the border.

As CFG was not targeted on role-players, as typical larps are, but on a more general audience, participants adopted positions in relation to the ractors. Some approached the ractors as actors who entertained and performed for them, but avoiding direct interaction as that was expected to happen in accordance with the fiction, while others adopted a more ludic position, challenging the game, addressing the NPCs in a diegetically coherent fashion, and even role-playing (cf. Stenros et al., 2011b). Though the ractors were instructed to treat all participants in the same manner, the participants' option of partaking as an audience member who also plays, or as a player-contributor effectively positions CFG in an interesting intersection between participatory theatre and larping (cf. Snow, 1993).

The friction between player agency to affect the story and the game organizer goal of creating a satisfactory narrative in larps can be addressed in practice with interactive actors and the non-player characters that they perform. The ractor functions

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identified in this paper, especially if they can be further confirmed in other, more typical, larps, can help understand not only gameplay/story dilemma, but help in making the continuum of co-creation more visible.

Players and game organizers both wield power to determine what takes place in a role-playing game, how the co-creation works, but this power is not evenly distributed. For example Montola (2012) and Mackay (2001) have offered theoretical models on this power structure. The functions identified in this paper as belonging to the ractors offer a concrete view of how that power is used in practise. The ractors are one of the concrete ways in which the runtime game masters direct larps (cf. Jonsson et al., 2006). However, the players – especially more experienced players – can also

employ all of these functions while participating. Instead of highlighting the difference between player participants and ractors we can look at this as a continuum. The player participants also are aware of the larp on number of levels (i.e. see it in different frames), can see how a storyline is developing and guess how it could be improved, improvise their character portrayals and new plots, entertain fellow players and are aware of safety considerations (e.g. Hansen 2010; Harviainen 2012a; Pohjola, 2011). By concentrating on ractors, who de-prioritize the playing of the game to facilitating it, strategies that all players can use have been rendered visible.

Larps are different from many other types of story-oriented games in that they offer more agency to the player. The human controlled facilitation of playing that runtime game mastering offers enables dynamic story changes. Though the findings in this paper relate to larp, they can help in contextualizing similar challenges in other types of role-playing games, MMOGs, and other story-oriented games.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored using interactive actors in non-player character roles in a live action role-playing game as a solution to negotiating the friction between crafting a satisfactory, pre-designed dramatic arc, and the agency of the co-creative player-participant. The functions a ractor needs to be able to fill and some of the challenges of performing and playing an NPC were explored through a qualitative interview study of interactive actors.

Six types of functions were identified: facilitation, content creation, character work, entertaining, playing and safeguarding. All ractors need not perform all of these roles, and indeed characters are tailored not just for the tasks needed, but also with an eye towards the performer. These functions can be broken down to sub-classes; for example facilitation includes runtime game mastering, mentoring and support work. The background of a ractor has a big impact on the way these functions are filled: ractors with a role-playing background for example tend to do their character work in a role-play paradigm, whereas ractors with a background in improvisational theatre see the character more as a shell and a vessel than a fully-fledged persona. Role-playing paradigm is also associated with the game mastering function,

whereas theatre background is a good fit for entertaining. The context where a character is performed is also important; content creation for a character online is a writing task whereas similar work in a live physical game event is based on improvising.

Finally, the article discussed the border between play and non-play by considering the relationship between the ractor and the character she plays. It was noted that the players also contribute to upholding the coherence of the game world and their experience.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Often the context, or setting, is fantastic, speculative or historical. Even larps that take place in the here and now differ in that within the diegetic setting the participants are not who they usually are.

² For a discussion of digital games and narratives, and the procedurality thereof, see Murray (1997, pp.65-94).

³ In digital theatre runtime game masters have been called *drama managers* (Lancaster, 1999, p.117; Aylett & Louchart, 2003).

⁴ When discussing digital games the functions of NPCs can be similar to embodied and performed NPCs (cf. Pinchbeck, 2009; Bartle, 2003; Lankoski & Björk, 2007; Lankoski, 2010), but it is more common that it is the technical implementation of NPCs (such as models of behaviour and artificial intelligence) that is scrutinized (e.g. Johansson et al., 2011).

⁵ I am indebted to Nathan Hook for this observation.

⁶ Grotowski's paratheatre (cf. Schechner, 1985) and certain types of applied theatre (cf. Blatner & Wiener, 2007), such as fully participatory murder mysteries (Curtis & Hensley, 2007), are an exception. They have been staged just for the participants.

⁷ See Mackay (2001, pp.92-98) for an analysis of how game masters wield power in tabletop role-playing games. It is not directly applicable to larp/ARG hybrids as Mackay is aware (Note 57), but provides an interesting perspective.

⁸ Obviously there are numerous other channels on the internet as well, but sticking to the more official ones and shying away from sites such as the anonymous imageboard 4chan lowers the risk of *game-jacking*.

⁹ Obviously there are numerous traditions of role-playing and acting, and this is a broad generalization. The role-players interviewed mostly had a background in Nordic larp and the actors were London-based and schooled in a particular strand of improvisation. Other acting traditions, such as the actor/historians at Plimoth Plantation, would probably adopt a strategy closer to the role-players (cf. Snow, 1993), as might Stanislavskian method actors.

¹⁰ There are schools of thought on how important the absolute coherence of a character is (for an extreme view, see Pohjola 2000). Even with the role-player rhetoric the NPC is primarily a game design tool and seemingly incongruous behaviour can usually be rationalized and explained later.

¹¹ It is interesting to compare this to the ideal in classic theatre to not to acknowledge the audience in any way (e.g. Howell, 2000).

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